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December 18, 1895.

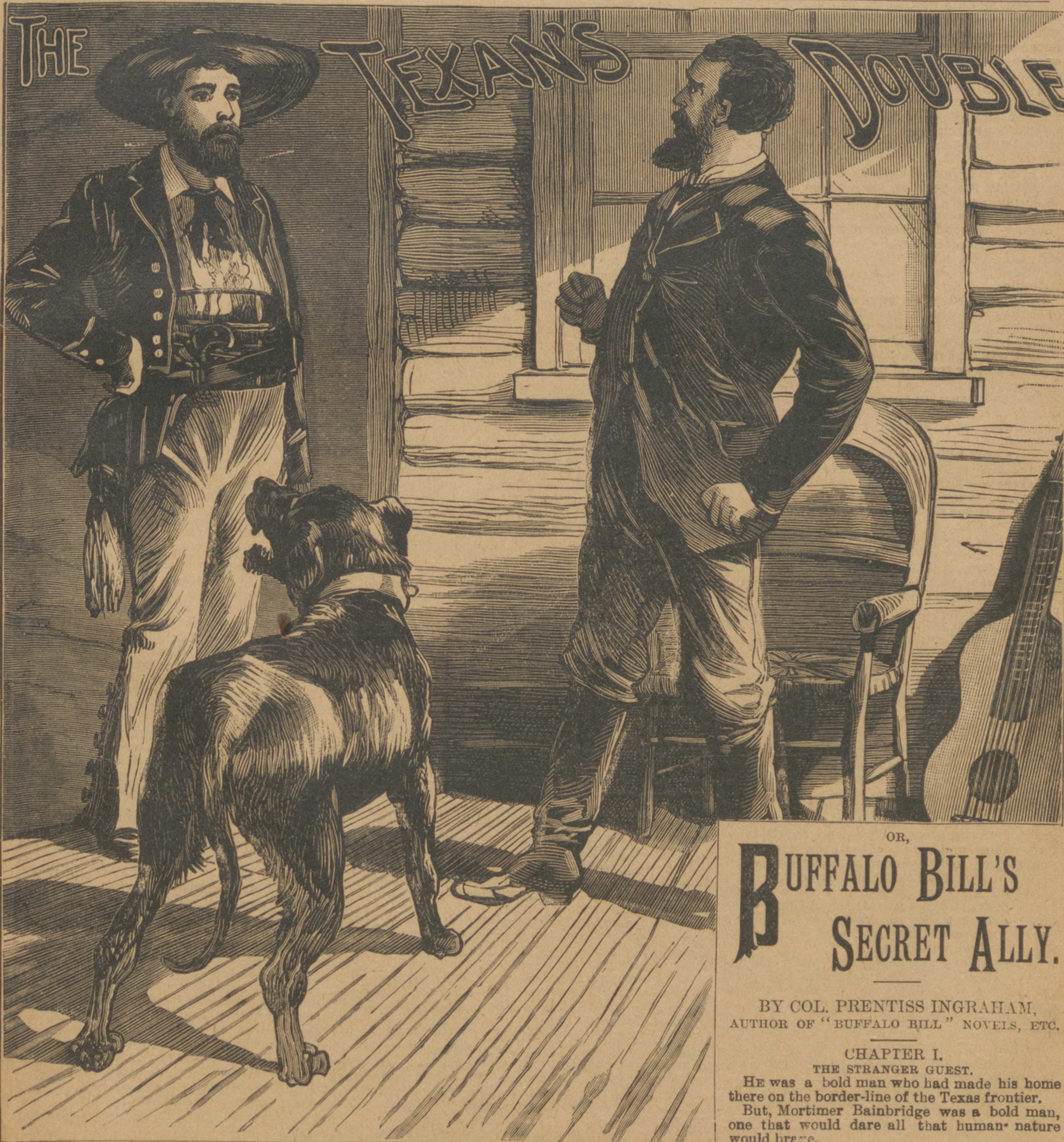
No. 895.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
93 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXIX.



OR,
**BUFFALO BILL'S
SECRET ALLY.**

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGER GUEST.

He was a bold man who had made his home there on the border-line of the Texas frontier.

But, Mortimer Bainbridge was a bold man, one that would dare all that human nature would baffle.

Two years before he had halted there one night in the timber, with a small train.

He had a guide, and except that he had done

"MY GOD! IS IT YOU, VIPER THAT YOU ARE? HOW DARE YOU CROSS THE THRESHOLD OF MY DOOR?"

from Mississippi, where he had been a planter, nothing was known of him.

Slavery no longer held in chains the black race; but a score of negroes, who had once acknowledged Mortimer Bainbridge as their legal master, had accompanied him to the Lone Star State.

There were old and young among them, all true as steel, faithfully following the fortunes of the one they loved, still acknowledging him their leader, their benefactor and friend.

Half a dozen army wagons, as many more ambulances, a complete "Gypsy wagon," a score of fine horses, half a hundred cattle, milch cows, sheep and hogs, and the teams drawn by mules made up the train, which Buckskin Sam* was guiding.

In the "master" the Texan guide had found no ordinary man. His physique was perfect; his manners even to his negroes, were courtly; and, ever dignified and gentle in his bearing, he was yet silent and almost stern.

"He has a history," Buckskin Sam had said to himself, after engaging as guide, and he gazed with real admiration upon the superb specimen of manhood it had been his good fortune to be thrown with in a perilous tramp across the Texan country, for in those days danger lurked constantly on hand.

A face handsome in the extreme, for his features were perfect, and seemingly one born to command, the mysterious emigrant was a study to the sharp-eyed and ever alert guide.

Noted, as Sam was, as the crack-shot of Texas, and a horseman of remarkable skill, this stranger was quite his equal, for the guide had never known him to miss a shot with revolver or rifle, while he was a perfect master in the saddle.

And, too, the planter had picked up lasso-throwing so quickly that he soon excelled his teacher, and Buckskin Sam had to confess that he took to trailing and Indian-fighting naturally, and already was the equal of any plains veteran.

Trying to find out something about the strange man from the negroes, Sam found that they were dumb upon the subject of their master's past life. The old ones would not talk, and the younger ones said that they knew nothing more than that "Master Mort" had decided to sell the old plantation in Mississippi and come to Texas, and several of the old-home families had come with him.

In talking with his employer, as they rode over the plains together at the head of the train, Buckskin Sam discovered that Mortimer Bainbridge had traveled much in foreign lands.

So it was that the guide one evening halted in a small timber tract on the point of a peninsula, or narrow bend formed by the river.

The bend was compressed at its entrance, with a ridge across it, through which was a chasm, or cut, barely wide enough for the train to go through.

There were hills, valleys and prairie lands in the bend, of many hundred acres. The sweeping river was a thorough defense all around it, and a barrier against the cattle straying.

"Here is the place I had in mind, Mr. Bainbridge, though, as I told you, it is across the danger line many miles; but you said you preferred to be beyond the furthest ranch."

"Yes, Sam, and this is my beau ideal of a frontier home, so here we camp," was the reply.

There were rich pasture lands, springs and rivulets, wood in untold quantities, and good building timber; so the home-seeker pitched his camp on the ridge, and the long march came to an end.

There being skilled mechanics among the negroes, the result was that all went to work, and in a couple of months the master had a pleasant cabin home, quarters for the blacks, sheds for the cattle, and a barrier in the pass which effectually guarded it.

Buckskin Sam, with two drivers and teams, had gone to the nearest town for supplies, and to secure a couple of cowboys to look after the cattle, while the negroes began to put corn, wheat and vegetables in the ground.

When the train was unloaded, it revealed a very comfortable lot of furniture for the master's cabin, and, once settled, the stern-faced man seemed to be content with the life he led there, far from civilization and friends.

He had his books about him, and he was no mean artist, while his rich, melodious voice often rung out over the plains as he sung at night, when seated upon his piazza, accompanying himself upon the guitar.

Scouts, guides and rangers knew always where to find a welcome, when on the trails, and the master of Overlook Ranch soon became noted as a host of rare hospitality, and withal a mystery to all who met him.

His cattle grew in number, his crops were bountiful, and fortune seemed to favor him until one night a roving band of red-skins swooped down upon his home.

But Mortimer Bainbridge, who had now become a perfect plainsman, had discovered their

approach, and had set a death-trap for them which proved to be a terrible lesson, and which they profited by, for Comanches gave his ranch a wide berth thereafter.

Believing that riches were to be gained by a raid upon the ranch, some Mexican bandits made an attack one night; but they, too, discovered that their coming was known, and were nearly wiped out by Bainbridge, his cowboys and faithful negro braves.

So had passed two years, when, one night, a man on horseback halted in the timber not far from the Overlook cabin.

To his ears came the sound of a voice in song, singing an old plantation ballad, while the notes of an accompanying guitar were also heard.

"Yes, I guessed aright; that is his voice. I knew that it could be no other than Mortimer Bainbridge, when those Mexicans told me what they did of this lone ranchero who dares dwell beyond the "dead-line" in Texas.

"But how will he receive me, now that I have dared to appear at his home? I have not come thus far to turn back now; there is too much at stake, so I will face what is before me."

The lone horseman rode on toward the cabin, dismounted, and throwing his bridle-rein over the rack, advanced on foot to the little piazza.

It was bright moonlight, and the master of Overlook arose to greet his visitor.

"Mortimer, I have come to crave your forgiveness, your pity."

"My God! Is it you, viper that you are? How dare you cross the threshold of my door, Branch Bainbridge?" and the voice rung out like a trumpet, startling from a sleep a large black hound, which sprang to his feet, and raising his head, uttered a deep, vengeful growl.

The stranger shrunk back at the deep-mouthed growl, like one appalled, while Mortimer Bainbridge cried:

"Ha! even that watchful brute knows you to be a creature of ill-omen, Branch Bainbridge, and thus warns me against you."

CHAPTER II.

FOR A BROTHER'S SAKE.

"BROTHER, I will heed the warning of your dog, and take my ill-omened shadow from your life; but, some day, you will forgive me—some day pity me, for I have suffered, oh, how much Heaven only knows!"

The man's voice quivered with suppressed emotion as he uttered the words, and he turned away like one who went without hope.

But a few steps only had he gone when Mortimer Bainbridge sprang from the steps, and placed his hand upon his shoulder, while he said, earnestly:

"Branch, you are my own flesh and blood, my own brother, and for the sake of our mother I do forgive, and will try to forget the terrible past."

"Come! This is my home, where I sought to hide myself from the world forever."

"Come, I say; my home is your home, Branch, and you shall be welcome, I pledge you."

The man to whom he spoke grasped his outstretched hand, and essayed to speak, but could not, for his effort ended in great sobs that shook his tall, powerful form as though he had been seized with a chill.

The Texan led him into the ranch and bade him be seated in an easy-chair in the cozy sitting-room. Then he went out and ordered a servant to take his horse and another to prepare supper and a room, for the cabin was a commodious one.

The brother, meanwhile, had paced the floor with downcast face and hands clasped behind his back.

He wore the garb of a Mexican, and his hair fell below his shoulders, while his face was heavily bearded.

At every step his huge spurs jingled musically, and his every movement was graceful; but, somehow, it would have impressed a reader of human nature as the grace of a panther.

His attire was worn by long use, and his belt of arms seemed intended for service, and he would have impressed a close observer as being a man who lived a life of peril, and accustomed to scenes of carnage.

Mortimer Bainbridge soon returned, and, as though he had made up his mind to banish bitter memories of the bygone, he at once spoke in a kindly tone:

"You are not looking your old self, Branch; you appear to have roughed it; but Overlook Ranch will soon build you up again, and there will be much here to interest you, I think."

"I have plenty of books, as you see; I get the papers every two weeks; I keep up my sketching in pencil and colors, and sing often for my own amusement."

"Then there is game in plenty, splendid fishing, a herd of wild horses now and then for a chase, with buffalo also, and something to quicken the blood in a brush with Indians and Mexican raiders from time to time, not to speak of the care of the place and my score of faithful blacks."

"Did you bring any negroes from the old place with you?" asked the brother.

"Only those from our grandmother's old place,

which plantation was mine by her will, you remember."

"They know then of—of—"

"If they know, Branch, never do they give hint of their knowledge, and they are true as steel. They came with me willingly and like it here very much."

"I am glad to see you happy, Mortimer, for you deserve it, while I certainly have suffered greatly."

"I am sorry it has been so."

"I have lived a life of misery, friendless, without money, and a fugitive."

"Do not speak of it again, for it is past, and this is your home now, and all I have I will share with you."

"But come; supper is ready," and he led the way to the little dining-room, where he said to the negro attendant:

"Winnie, you remember my brother Branch? He has come to live with us."

Winnie, an old negress, did seem to remember Branch, and unpleasantly, for she simply said:

"Glad to see you ag'in, sah, if Mars' Mort is."

Her looks somewhat belied her welcome.

An hour later Branch Bainbridge pleaded fatigue and retired, while his brother put on his sombrero, pulled it down over his eyes and went out for a walk in the moonlight.

As he paced to and fro his thoughts went back into the past. He recalled a happy home in his boyhood, clouded only by the acts of a willful brother.

He remembered a girl sweetheart, estranged from him by cruel stories in which there was no foundation in truth, told by that same brother, who was his rival in love.

Then came the blow that sent him a wanderer, a fugitive to other lands, for the stain of a crime was upon him!

Guilty, or innocent, he had either to fly or go to prison, perhaps to the gallows, for a life had been taken, and the dead man robbed of many thousands of dollars.

It broke the hearts of his proud old parents, and in his wanderings in Eastern lands word came to him that his father had died, and his mother soon after was placed by the husband's side in the little family burying-ground of the estate.

The plantation and all was left to his brother—all but what had been already mortgaged to pay that brother's gambling debts.

One day a letter came to him from his lawyer. It read:

"Your parents disinherited you, but your grandmother died, leaving you her plantation and personal effects."

"You can come home, now, for a man who died in prison a few days ago made a confession that you were wholly innocent of the crime you are accused of, and that he and your brother were the guilty ones."

"The confession created a great sensation. The indictment against you I had annulled, though, as the criminal had had trouble with your brother and had vowed revenge upon him. Many believe that the man made the charge against him to be avenged."

"There are others who believe in your innocence, and that you sacrificed yourself for your brother."

"I need hardly say that Branch Bainbridge has fled, over head and ears in debt, hated by all, and with the charge of murder and robbery now resting upon his shoulders."

Such was the momentous letter. Upon receiving it, Mortimer Bainbridge had started for his home in the far-away South.

The law no longer held the hangman's noose over his head, and so he sold out his inheritance and sought a home in Texas, far from all who had known him, and with only a few faithful servants to follow his fortunes.

And after dwelling there in peace, if not happiness, with prosperity coming upon him, his brother, for whom he had so deeply suffered, came to that far-away home beyond the danger-line on the Texas Plains.

And more: he had bid the outlawed man welcome, had banished the shadow of ill-omen which had fallen across his threshold at sight of him, and forgiving the past, if not forgetting, had told him that his home should be shared with him.

Was he warming back to life in his bosom a serpent to strike again at his inmost heart?

The sequel will show.

CHAPTER III.

THE RANCHERO'S WARNING.

A MAN lay resting upon the ground, beneath the shelter of a tree, while his horse was feeding near.

Between the lips of the man was a cigar, and he was idly watching the smoke curl into many fancied forms above his head, when he started as voices reached his ears.

There was the sound of hoof-falls, too, and his horse pricked up his ears, but was quieted by a sign from his master.

"They are passing in the canyon below. Who can they be? Ah! they have halted," and he crept to the edge of the ridge sixty feet away, where a thicket overhung the bank, and glared down into a narrow canyon.

Three horsemen were there, and one was talking as the watcher looked over at them from his covert.

He was saying:

* Major Sam S. Hall, a noted Texan ranger, scout and guide; died inilmington, Del., several years ago; the hero of many a romance of the Lone Star State.—THE AUTHOR.

"I says wait for 'm here, for trailin' from here is hard work, and they might miss us, and we'll never git another chance like this one fer our work."

"Why won't we, pard?" asked another.

"Waal, the cowboys of ther ranch hev all gone off arter ther stampeded cattle, and 'cept in' ther old gent, his darter and two nigger sarvants, there hain't no one else thar ter hinder us from makin' a clean sweep."

"If we waits for t'others, we will be nine ag'in' ther old man and his niggurs."

"One of ther niggers is a woman, pard, so we'll hev only the old man and his one sarvant ter fight."

"Waal, we three ought ter be enough, and then it's long division with us, while ef we loses our pards by not waitin' for 'em, we will hev a case o' short division, as that will be mine ter git what we three might."

"We would git the wu'st o' it in the end, pards, fer they'd hunt us hot ef we deserted 'em, while thar is plenty in old Noland's for all."

"What does yer call plenty, pard?"

"Waal, he were a aristocrat whar he come from, and fetched his table-silver with him; and then he hev got some thousands in gold hid in his house, while his darter has got as fine a lot o' jewelry as yer ever seen."

"I tells yer ther haul this night will be wu'th a clean thousand apiece to us, ef not more."

"You knows this, does yer?"

"Waal, I were cowboy thar fer four months."

"What made yer leave?"

"I got sweet on Miss Jessie, and her pa jist give me ten minutes ter levant, so I levanted."

"I see; and you is so aferd o' ther old man's gun yer don't want ter return fer yer valuables unless yer has eight pards ter back yer up?"

"Waal, about thet, fer ther old man will hev ter be kilt, ther gal captered and held until she pays big fer her liberty, and ther niggers hed best be weazened also, so they won't be nobody ter tell on us, yer see."

The horseman had overheard a strange plot of deviltry, and he quietly withdrew from the edge of the canyon, as though not wishing to hear more.

He reached the side of his horse, mounted, and rode slowly away until he had left the canyon and the plotters a mile behind him.

Then he halted and mused:

"Old Noland's, they said; and his daughter. There is a ranchero by that name, I believe, who has a daughter, living about fifteen miles from the canyon; but I will have to make a wide flank movement, as I dare not cross the prairie where they can see me."

"Yes, I will have to travel along the ridge for miles and then strike off across the prairie; so, good fellow, you will have a little over thirty miles to travel, and in an hour it will be sunset."

"Come, Pard, you must show what you can do, for much hangs on your speed and endurance."

And he patted the neck of his superb horse affectionately.

Dismounting, he looked to his saddle-girths, and then led the way to a brook, where he refreshed himself and his horse with a drink of cool water.

Mounting, he started off at a slow canter, and held it for several miles; then he drew rein to a walk, as the ground was rough, and night-fall found him descending a ridge to a level plain.

A stream was there, and the rider bathed the nostrils of his horse, took off the saddle and bridle for a temporary rest, and, with a few swallows of water allowed the faithful beast, he again sprung into his replaced saddle.

"Now go, Pard, and show your mettle!"

The horse seemed to understand all that he was expected to do, and sprung away in a long, sweeping gallop.

The night was dark, for the stars were obscured by clouds, and the prairie stretched away like a vast, limitless sea upon all sides, with nothing to guide the horseman on his way into space.

But on he kept, Pard never tiring in his long, sweeping gallop until miles had been cast behind him by his flying hoofs.

At length the rider came to a halt, took off the heavy Mexican saddle, and, carrying it himself, walked along while his faithful black followed.

A tramp of half a mile thus cooled the back of the animal and rested him greatly.

The saddle was put on once more, and the nostrils bathed with water from the rider's canteen, and, thus recruited, the animal again set out in a swift pace, this time urged to greater speed than before.

The pace became a run, in fact, that was kept up untiringly until a dark object appeared ahead, and soon, within the depths, glimmered a light.

"I have been true in my reckoning, for that is the ranch, and I hope I am some little time ahead of those plotters," mused the rider.

But he did not allow his now tired horse to slacken his pace, and, ten minutes after, dashed into the timber, in the midst of which was a

substantial border home with all its surroundings.

Dismounting quickly, the horseman, unheeding the dogs snarling about his heels, approached the door and knocked, just as it was opened by a man of three-score years, dressed in homespun and with a face stamped with nobility of character.

"Pardon me, sir, but are you Ranchero Noland?"

"I am, sir. Come in and accept the hospitality of my home for the night," was the response.

"I am self-invited to do so, sir, and have ridden over thirty miles the past three hours to arrive in time to warn you of a danger that threatens you and yours to-night."

"Permit me first to see to my well nigh broken-down horse, and I will explain."

"My dear sir, you surprise me; but you seem in deadly earnest. I will have my man see to your horse while you come in and tell me all," and Ranchero Noland led the way into a cozy sitting-room, while he continued:

"A few minutes later and you would have found us retired, sir; but, let me present my daughter, sir, Jessie Noland."

"My name is Mortimer Bainbridge, sir," and the speaker bowed low before the most beautiful maiden he had ever beheld, and whose glance and welcome thrilled him to the heart.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RAIDERS.

"MORTIMER BAINBRIDGE?" and Ranchero Noland repeated the name, while he glanced quickly toward his daughter, as though to say:

"What a coincidence!"

It was a coincidence, for the father and daughter had been talking of the man before them when his knock came upon the door of their home.

They had heard of the mysterious ranchero who had dared to live beyond what was known as the border "dead line," further by many miles than another ranchero had gone.

And more, faithful negroes who had been his slaves had dared go there with him.

They had talked over the service he had done, for the raiders and red-skins who had been wont to raid in upon the settlements, had been deterred from doing so with Mortimer Bainbridge in their rear, ever ready with his half-dozen cowboys and as many negroes, all of them good marksmen and wild riders, to attack a force in the rear.

Strange stories were told of this silent, stern and handsome man, and he was spoken of as "The Mysterious Ranchero" upon every hand.

From the cowboys of his ranch, and passing travelers, Colonel Noland, for he was an ex-officer of the army, had heard strange tales of the young ranchero.

At the time of the visit of Mortimer Bainbridge, the entire force of the ranch were absent after stampeded cattle, and as the discharged cowboy, who had arranged the plot against Colonel Noland and his daughter, had said, only a negro man and his wife were on the place to call upon in case of need.

So the father and daughter would have been left at the mercy of the raiders but for the timely warning of the mysterious ranchero.

It was an hour after the coming of Bainbridge to the ranch before the barking of the dogs announced that strangers were near.

The negro man and his wife had come into the cabin, the former being well armed and a nervy fellow in need.

His wife had gone to the room of her young mistress, where the shutters had been closed, the curtains drawn, so as to shut out the light. The spare weapons in the house were laid out loaded, with extra ammunition for those of Bainbridge and the colonel.

The latter had left the place of defense wholly to the younger ranchero, who had decided what was best to be done, and in spite of protests from the colonel and Jessie, had taken up his position outside.

Lasso Jim, as the colonel had called the discharged cowboy, rode up to the cabin, while his comrades on foot, for they left their horses at the outer fence, had crept noiselessly into the yard to be near when their leader had gained an entrance into the house.

This was to be done by strategy if possible; or, if strategy failed, then force was to be used.

When he hailed, Lasso Jim was answered by the colonel from within.

"Well, what is wanted?"

"A stranger, sir, who has got lost from his train, begs a night's lodging if you please."

"Who are you?"

"My name is James, sir."

"Yes, Lasso Jim, for I know your voice, disguise it as you may."

"Well, colonel, you wouldn't turn me away at night, if I am Lasso Jim, would you?"

"I would turn no man away who came honestly; but I am alone here with my daughter and two servants, and must be cautious about admitting one about whom such stories are told as about you, Lasso Jim."

"Does yer refuse ter let me in?" and Lasso

Jim dropped back into his border dialect once more.

"I certainly do."

"Waal, I'll hev ter come in. Ho, pards!"

"Yes, Jim," came in a chorus of voices.

"Right yonder ag'in' the fence lies some hewn timbers, so jist raise one and rush it ag'in' ther door, and it will open."

"I warn you to keep off, Lasso Jim," sternly cried the colonel from within.

"Bah! I don't heed yer warning, for I holds trumps, and ther game are in my hands," and Lasso Jim coolly dismounted, while his comrades came forward with a long and heavy piece of timber.

"Rush it ag'in' ther door, pards, and let go as she strikes, fer yer hes ter be keerful not ter git hustled in ther crash."

"Then we'll sail in all in a heap and the cabin and its occupants is ours."

The men gave a cheer at this, and, steadying themselves with the timber, began to move forward, going more rapidly as they advanced.

But, suddenly, came a wild and ringing war-cry, which caused each man to let go his hold of the cross-sticks with which they held the timber, and it fell with a crash to the ground.

At the same time a horseman dashed forward from the gateway, shouting:

"Come on, men, and shoot them down!"

And, looking from a peep-hole in the window, Jessie Noland beheld the single horseman charge into the midst of the raiders, his revolvers flashing rapidly, for he held one in each hand.

Other revolvers cracked too, and the horse went down; but the rider caught upon his feet, and still kept up his fire.

The colonel instantly threw open the door and with the negro sallied forth, their rifles cracking at the now flying raiders.

Lasso Jim had rushed for his horse, but, as he was about to mount, the animal dropped dead from a shot fired by the Mysterious Ranchero, and the man had to fly on foot.

To the fence where they had hitched their horses the raiders sped, but not a horse was there! and believing that the cowboys had returned, the frightened gang fled out upon the prairies to ride or run away as best they could.

But not all had gone, for three lay dead before the cabin and another was severely wounded.

Then, too, Lasso Jim had received a slight wound, as had also two others among the fugitives; but life was dear to them, and they made their escape at full speed.

"Come, Sam, we must get these dead men out of the sight of Miss Noland," said Bainbridge, to the negro.

"Yas, boss; but what about de wounded man, sah?"

"Is one wounded?"

"Yas, sah."

"Well, I must care for him, Sam, for when a man is down he is no longer a foe."

"Noble words, Mr. Bainbridge. If you will bring the man into the house I will aid you to care for him," cried Jessie Noland, from the piazza.

"Perhaps, Miss Noland, it would be as well to take him to the cowboys' quarters."

"No, bring him here, please."

The colonel now came up and also urged it; so the wounded cowboy was taken into the cabin and placed upon a cot, while Mortimer Bainbridge said:

"Fortunately, I know something of surgery, and therefore will see to his wound."

"You gave it to me," said the cowboy, who turned his gaze upon the ranchero.

"Then I am surprised it was not a death-wound, my man, for I fired to kill," was the cool response.

"It glanced upon my knife-hilt, or I would have been bored through, for it was well-aimed. But, tell me: will I die?"

"No. The wound is painful, but not fatal."

"I am glad of that, for I am too wicked to die," the raider said earnestly.

Bainbridge dressed the wound with a skill that proved he did have a knowledge of surgery, and then said:

"Now, Sam, we will scout around to see if those fellows intend more mischief. Then there are eight saddled horses to look after, for I led them away from where they were hitched. Afterward we have some graves to dig."

"Colonel, you remain indoors, for those raiders may return. I will come back after awhile with Sam."

Argument was useless, and the ranchero and Sam left the cabin together.

Two hours passed and the two scouts returned to report that the dead had been buried, the horses of the robbers unsaddled and put in the corral, and not a trace of the fugitives to be found.

"They are too badly scared to stop short of the timber, where they can hide their trails," said the wounded raider.

"Well, my man, as you have suffered for your lawless act by your wound, I will ask Colonel Noland to give you your horse and let you go, as soon as you are able, which will be in a few days, and my advice to you is to let this be

a lesson to keep you from the gallows in the end," said Mortimer Bainbridge.

"I'll take your advice, sir, and if you are willing to trust me, I'll come and serve you as cowboy for what you have done for me."

"I need another man, so come when you are able. I will trust you and pay you full wages. I am not one to put a barrier in the path of any man who would turn from a life of evil."

Jessie Noland noticed the strange tone and manner in which those words were uttered, and she thought:

"Has he also done a wrong which he seeks to atone by his strange life here on the border?"

"No, I cannot believe that such a man can be guilty of an ignoble act."

So met the Mysterious Ranchero and Jessie Noland, the "Pearl of the Prairie," as the rangers had named the beautiful girl.

CHAPTER V.

THE STING OF THE SERPENT.

If Mortimer Bainbridge showed by his actions that he loved Jessie, in the several months that passed after the attack of the raiders upon the Noland Ranch, Colonel Noland also discovered that his daughter was equally as deeply interested in the mysterious ranchero.

He appreciated all that Bainbridge had done for him and his daughter; he found him to be a man of strongest character, fascinating in his manners, and with a certain personal magnetism about him which was irresistible and won all alike, though he never seemed conscious of his power.

He had, when urged, remained at the Noland Ranch for several days, and awaited the return of the cowboys, and, meanwhile, had nursed the wounded raider as tenderly as he might a brother, and departing, carried him with him to his ranch, thus showing his confidence in one who had said he would repent the past and live a better life in the future.

Afterward, every week or so he would halt for a night at Noland Ranch, and thus had Jessie begun to look for his coming.

What had driven Colonel Noland to seek a home on the Texas prairies, and carry his daughter there with him, no one knew; but Jessie seemed happy with her lot, though Mortimer Bainbridge had discovered in many ways that she had once reigned as a belle in an Eastern city.

Telling nothing of his past, Colonel Noland had not questioned the young ranchero, who was as silent as the grave in regard to his early life.

Thus the months had passed, Colonel Noland seeming to realize the inevitable, as far as the Mysterious Ranchero and his daughter were concerned.

One afternoon a negro messenger rode up to the Noland Ranch and was the bearer of two letters.

One of these was addressed in a bold hand to

"COLONEL RANDOLPH NOLAND,

"Retreat Ranch.

"Per LUCAS."

The other bore the name of Jessie Noland, and Lucas stated that he came from "Mars' Mort Bainbridge, of Overlook Ranch."

Jessie read her letter with a flushed face, and no wonder when the reader knows the contents, for it was as follows:

"MY VERY DEAR JESSIE:—

"When last I bade you farewell you told me that you loved me and promised that the next time I came to Retreat Ranch I might ask your father for your hand.

"I now have to tell you that news of importance just received from home will call me thither, and thence to New York, keeping me away for six months or more, and I am going to beg of you the greatest favor man can ask of woman.

"I am going to ask you to become my wife, Jessie, and accompany me on my trip, which will then be a happy one indeed.

"This is sudden, I know, and it will leave your father desolate, to rob him of the joy of his home; but still, I hope that he will not refuse me, if you are willing to become my wife.

"I write your father also, and Lucas will bring the responses I will so long to receive.

"Let me add, if I am to be fortunate, I will come to Retreat Ranch in five days, accompanied by a clergyman.

"I await your answer with hope, and the presence of guests here at my home alone keeps me from coming instead of writing.

"Ever yours devotedly,

"MORTIMER BAINBRIDGE."

While Jessie was reading her letter, Colonel Noland was likewise occupied with the one he had received, and which, after reading carefully, caused him to say:

"This is very sudden, though I knew it must come, and my dear child confessed that he had told her he loved her, and her response.

"He writes a manly letter, and I will be glad of so noble a son-in-law.

"The trip will do Jessie good, poor child, and as she will now be known as Mrs. Bainbridge, no one will recall the bitter past through hearing her own name.

"I can but give my consent, sudden as it is, if Jessie says she wishes it so."

And Colonel Noland arose and sought his daughter.

For a long time they talked together, and then Lucas returned with responses to make his master happy.

The five days passed away in eager preparation by Jessie, for the most important start in a woman's life, and one afternoon late an ambulance drove up to Ranch Retreat, with Lucas driving a fine pair of mules, and his master and a clergyman on the back seat.

When the ambulance drove away, three hours after, over the moonlit prairie, the clergyman sat in the seat with Lucas, and Jessie was seated by the side of her husband, and the sob that came from her breast now and then told how bitter was the parting with her father, notwithstanding her joy as a bride.

Several days passed, and Colonel Noland roamed about like one whose life was aimless. His books failed to entertain him, and he spent most of the time roaming about his ranch and away with his cowboys.

One evening, just at sunset, as he returned to his home, he saw a horseman ride up and dismount.

"My God! it is Bainbridge! Can aught have happened to my child?"

So saying, he spurred forward, and soon dismounted at the piazza, where Mortimer Bainbridge awaited him.

Quick, Bainbridge, tell me if aught has gone wrong with Jessie?"

"Is she not here, sir?"

"Here! My God, no! How could she be when she left with you?"

"Left with me, Colonel Noland? I do not understand your ambiguous words."

"Come, Bainbridge, tell me what this means?" and the quivering voice of the old officer showed that he was terribly in earnest, while in the look of amazement in the face of the young ranchero proved that he was acting no part.

"I mean, Colonel Noland, that I came here to-night to ask you for your daughter's hand, she having already given me proof that my deep love for her is returned.

"I have been absent in Mexico for over two weeks, having been unexpectedly called there upon a most painful matter to me.

"Now you tell me that your daughter has gone, and that she left with me?"

"Yes, as I did believe, as *your wife*. In God's name, Bainbridge, what fearful mistake has been made?"

The old officer fairly started at the change in the face of Mortimer Bainbridge. It changed to a deathlike hue, and every feature grew rigid, and a look that was appalling to gaze upon shone from the eyes.

He twice essayed to speak ere he could command his voice, but at last he said, in a tone hoarse with suppressed feeling:

"Colonel Noland, I understand now what you meant when you said that your daughter left your home with me, as my wife;—*the man who led her away was my very image!*"

"Yes, yes, and here is the letter I received from you—as I supposed—sent by your man, Lucas—see!"

Mortimer Bainbridge took the letter with marked calmness, and glanced over its contents.

Then he said, in the same low, quivering voice:

"Colonel Noland, this writing is a clever forgery of my own hand, and upon you and your unfortunate daughter has been perpetrated the foulest of wrongs, which I will explain when I have heard from you all that occurred.

In a frightened manner, Colonel Noland told of all that had occurred, the two letters received, the coming of the ambulance with the supposed ranchero and a clergyman, the marriage and departure five days before.

Then in trumpet tones rung the voice of the Mysterious Ranchero:

"Colonel Noland, that man who has led your daughter into a mock marriage is my twin brother, and a Mormon—yes, a *Danite chief!*"

CHAPTER VI.

COLORADO CARL.

THE man who had been wounded by Mortimer Bainbridge in the attack upon the ranch of Colonel Noland answered to the name of Colorado Carl.

If he told his real name to the man who had become his benefactor, it was not referred to, so he went by his frontier appellation of Colorado Carl on the Overlook Ranch among the half-dozen cowboys whom the ranchero had to employ for his increasing herds.

Colorado Carl seemed not to be known to any of the cowboys, and he was looked upon as an old friend of the "Chief," and an ally of Buffalo Bill.

He was a good-looking fellow, with an athletic form, quick in his movements, and soon showed that he was a thorough frontiersman.

He rode splendidly, threw a lariat unerringly and was a dead shot.

Then, too, he possessed a good voice and sung ballads for his comrades, showing himself quite proficient in playing the guitar and bugle.

He had a small silver bugle with an inscription of presentation upon it which read:

"To

CHARLES CANFIELD,

Presented by

The 5th Regiment, U. S. Cavalry,

as an appreciation

of

His Courage and Valuable Services.

UTAH, May 1st, 18—."

Whether Charles Canfield was Colorado Carl he never told, nor did he say how he got possession of the handsome instrument of solid silver.

Of his past he had nothing to say, and neither Mortimer Bainbridge or himself ever spoke of how he got his wound, or that he had been in an attack of lawless raiders upon an honest ranchero.

Colorado Carl had been several months at the ranch, and was popular with all, while Mortimer Bainbridge had taken a great fancy to him, and the negroes always found in him a kind friend.

When he first came, Branch Bainbridge, who had become a fixture at Overlook Ranch, had slightly changed color at sight of him, and, hastening to his brother, had said:

"Mort, where did you get that new fellow?"

"He was wounded in a little fracas, and I brought him home with me to give him a place, Branch."

"Do you know him?"

"Well, something of him. Why?"

"I don't like his face."

"Now, I do; and I believe I am a good reader of human nature."

"It strikes me that I have seen him before, and engaged in ugly work."

"Perhaps so; but I have confidence in him now."

As he could gain no further information from his brother, Branch Bainbridge sought the subject of his inquiries.

"My man, have we never met before?" he asked.

"It does not seem to me, sir, that we have."

"I thought perhaps that I had seen you in Mexico?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Maybe in New Mexico?"

"No, Mr. Bainbridge."

"Perhaps it was in Colorado?"

"No, sir."

"But your name is Colorado Carl?"

"Yes, sir; I killed a desperado of that name down in San Antone, and as they did not know my real name, the boys called me after the deceased."

"I see; but what is your real name?"

"Call me Carl, sir, or Colorado Carl, if you prefer."

"I think that it was in Utah I met you."

"No, sir, for I have never been in Utah. Had I ever met one of your appearance, I could never forget him. You and your brother, Mr. Bainbridge, are extraordinary-looking men."

"Yes, so men say, and it is not easy for us to hide ourselves."

"You think we resemble each other, then, greatly?"

"In a marked and striking degree, sir, and if you dressed alike I confess I would not know you apart without studying your faces closely."

"Our faces are different then, you think?"

"Well, sir, your brother has a sad expression which you have not got."

"Yes, I believe he has."

"He was disappointed in love in early life, I believe, and sorrow has left its impress upon him," and with the hope that the wound of Carl would soon be healed, Branch Bainbridge walked out of the cabin, while he muttered:

"I was mistaken; he is not the man, I am sorry to say. If he was he would be useful to me."

When Branch Bainbridge had gone, Colorado Carl smiled in a peculiar way as he mused:

"Until I saw him, I believed his brother was the man I had met, and was playing ignorance of me for a purpose of his own; but now, I see that the brother is a noble man, and *this one*, is the one I supposed him to be.

"I will keep my secret to myself, and watch and wait. Now, I am the friend of Mortimer Bainbridge unto death!"

"He acted from pity for me, from nobleness of nature in caring for me as he did, and in bringing me here. In return I will be his best friend, for his brother, if I mistake not, is his worst foe, and is here for some sinister purpose. What that purpose is it must be my work to find out and thwart. Colorado Carl is on the trail!"

CHAPTER VII.

A RUSE THAT WON SUCCESS.

SOME months after the arrival of Colorado Carl at Overland Ranch, he asked permission of Mortimer Bainbridge for leave for a few weeks.

"You do not intend to leave me, I hope, Carl?" demanded the ranch-owner.

"Oh, no, chief; I assure you nothing of the kind."

"I should dislike to have you do so, for you have become very useful to me, and I am happy to say that I trust you most thoroughly in everything."

"You have shown that, chief, by sending me to the town to get money for you, sir, and I appreciate your confidence; but, I wish to take a little run into Mexico."

"A run into Mexico?"

"Yes, sir, for I have a mission to perform there. But, chief?"

"Well, Carl?"

"I would like to have every one, without exception, believe that you send me to San Antonio on business for you."

"Why, Carl, you are growing mysterious."

"I will explain all in good time, sir; but you have been so good to me, have trusted me so thoroughly, when you knew that I was a confederate of bad men, that I hope you will still give me your confidence and do as I ask you."

"I will, certainly; but, when do you wish to start?"

"To-morrow, sir."

"All right, and I suppose you wish some money?"

"Not much, sir, only a couple of months' pay."

The amount was given to him, and the next day Colorado Carl mounted his horse and rode away, presumably sent to San Antonio on business for the chief, who several times before had sent him there.

Somehow it leaked out that the chief, as the cowboys always called Mortimer Bainbridge, had sent quite a sum of money by Carl, to be deposited in the bank at San Antonio. It was thought to be taking big risks for the ranchero to trust a large amount to one messenger, for, no matter how honest he might be, there were plenty of villains to waylay him for the money.

It was nearly sunset when Carl departed, and he rode slowly along for a couple of miles, when he halted and dismounted, and from a hiding-place in the chaparral he took a large bundle rolled in a blanket.

Unrolled, these appeared to be, at first glance, the form of a man, but closer observation revealed the fact that it was a "dummy."

"There were the hunting-shirt, sombrero, arms, legs with boots and spurs, the pants stuck in the top of the boots, and a mask of buckskin, painted to resemble the human face!

It certainly was no mean work of art, and Carl chuckled to himself as he placed it in his saddle.

He had also arranged wires and props which held the dummy upright in the saddle, and then, having strapped a belt of mock weapons around his waist, put his horse upon the trail and said to the beast, as though he were talking to a human being:

"Go ahead slow, Brother, and don't forget to come when I call."

The intelligent animal whom the cowboy called Brother, and had trained wonderfully well, moved on at a brisk walk.

Colorado, waiting until he had gone about a hundred yards, then followed on foot.

The trail ran through a vale, with hillocks and outspurs on either side, and here and there a dense growth of chaparral and a copse of heavy timber.

The horse had held on his way for a mile, when, one! two! three! sharply rung out a trio of revolver-shots.

Carl bounded forward to discover his horse coming back toward him at a trot, while a man who had sprung from cover into the trail was raising his rifle to fire again, evidently the animal now being his aim, as the dummy form had fallen forward upon the horn of the saddle.

But Colorado Carl touched the trigger of his rifle the quickest, and though the weapon of the other was discharged, a nerveless finger had fired it, as the man sunk in his tracks.

"Well done, Brother, old fellow! Come back with me now," and the obedient horse followed, while his owner went at a run toward the one whom he had shot down.

The bullet of the cowboy had pierced the side of the would-be assassin, and he was dying when Carl reached him.

"Elder Snow! Is it you?" cried Colorado Carl, excitedly.

"Yes, and you have killed me— Ah! you are Wild Charlie, the Bugler!"

"How could I know it was you, elder, who meant to kill and rob me? I found out that I was to be waylaid, so arranged a plan to catch my enemy."

"Elder, I fear you must die."

"I know that I cannot live, and you are my assassin, man!"

"Dear elder, don't be so severe upon me, for think how deeply I must grieve over my act of slaying a saint—a devoted member of the Church!"

The dying man seemed to writhe under the sarcasm.

"You have murdered me, curse you!" he gasped again.

"Tell me if I can do aught for you to atone for my impious act of robbing the Church of your precious life. Would you send any word to—"

"Yes, yes; I have much to say, many messages to send, and I have papers with me of great importance which you must deliver. Do you hear? You must deliver! or I will haunt you waking and sleeping."

"Tell me all that you would have me do, elder. Let me say to you that I fear you cannot last long."

"Curse you! don't I know that as well as you?" was the vicious retort.

And the dying man groaned, more, it seemed, in agony of spirit than from physical suffering.

Carl arranged him as comfortably as possible, gave him a pull at a flask of liquor he carried, and then sat near to hear what he would say.

For half an hour the dying man talked, his voice growing weaker and weaker, excepting when he would burst forth to repeat maledictions on his slayer.

At last the voice sunk into a whisper that soon became inarticulate, and then ceased; the elder was dead.

For some time Colorado Carl sat gazing upon the face of the man he had slain; not a trace of sorrow was depicted on his own face; on the contrary, he seemed to wear a look of triumph.

Then he thoroughly and coolly searched the body, taking from it a belt of gold, some papers that seemed of value, a bundle of letters and his weapons, along with a ring from the second finger of the left hand, and which bore a peculiar design upon the stone.

Wrapping the body in its blanket, he bore it away from the trail to a secluded spot and there buried it.

Then, mounting his horse, which had followed him as patiently as a dog, he went in search of the animal ridden by the saint.

He soon found him staked out in a secure hiding-place not far from the scene of the ambush, and fastening the neck-ropes to his saddle-horn he rode on his way.

"Now for my mission to Mexico, and when I return some one will have to suffer," was his muttered but firmly-formed decision.

CHAPTER VIII.

BUCKSKIN SAM BRINGS A LETTER.

AFTER the coming of Branch Bainbridge to Overlook Ranch, he seemed to his brother like a changed man. His reckless manner was gone, and he appeared to be subdued, like one who suffered under some cruel grief.

Mortimer Bainbridge treated him with gentleness, showing how he wished him to feel at home, and yet a careful observer might have seen that, though he had forgiven the past, he had not forgotten it.

The brothers were seldom together, unless in the evening in the cabin, and then Mortimer was wont to be busy with his accounts and letters, or his books, while Branch would sit for an hour or more doing nothing but gaze into vacancy, like one who was communing with unpleasant thoughts.

Now and then the twain would hunt together, but oftener, Branch went alone, and kept the ranch people well supplied with game.

At times he would be absent a couple of days on these hunts, but no anxiety was felt about him, as he had shown himself a skilled frontiersman.

One evening Mortimer had said to him:

"Branch, I deem it my duty to tell you that I hope to get married before very long."

"Married?" asked Branch, in surprise.

"Yes, I told you of my having been so fortunate as to render a service to Colonel Noland and his daughter, and I not only love Miss Noland, but have reason to believe that she returns my affection."

"I did not think you hardly knew her."

"Yes, I have been quite often to Retreat Ranch. I intend now to tell her of my love, and hope it will be to hear from her lips that I have not loved in vain."

"I sincerely hope so, brother."

"Thank you, Branch, and I wish to say that if I do marry her, I will either make my home at Retreat Ranch or go East, while you can remain here and take full charge of the ranch."

"I will give you a half-share in it, just as it is, with cattle, pony herds and all. The income to both of us will be a liberal one, for each year now it is growing larger."

"These are my plans, if I am accepted by Miss Noland; but, if not, I shall still remain here, becoming more of a hermit than ever."

"I have heard that Miss Noland is rich, brother."

"Ah! you have heard of her other than through me?"

"Only while in New Mexico, I was in the mines where several paying leads were owned by a Texas ranchero by the name of Randolph Noland, which you said was the colonel's name. The Noland referred to had been an army officer and had a daughter of about eighteen, so I judge your lady-love must be the same one."

"Perhaps; but, as for her being rich or poor I do not care. I have saved up a snug sum, and my ranch is paying handsomely, so I need not wish for more, and if I marry it will yield us both a very handsome income, Branch."

"You are very kind, brother, and I feel that I do not deserve it of you."

"The past is buried, Branch, and you deserve at my hands all that one brother in good fortune can do for one in misfortune; so feel as I wish you to in this matter."

It was some weeks after this conversation that the brothers held another one upon the same subject. Mortimer then announced that Jessie Noland had told him she loved him and would be his wife, but that he had not yet spoken to the colonel upon the subject.

Several days after this Colorado left for his mission to Mexico, whatever it was, and Branch Bainbridge departed on an extended hunt which would be of several days' duration, he said.

Carl had been gone just ten days when Buckskin Sam arrived at Overlook Ranch one afternoon, bearing a letter from the cowboy.

The scout incidentally remarked that he was from San Antonio and came from Colorado Carl, who had gotten into trouble there.

Mortimer Bainbridge took the letter and breaking the seal read it, while his brother carefully watched his face the while.

The letter was as follows:

"On Mexican side of Rio Grande—
Saturday.

"MY DEAR CHIEF:—

"If any one sees you read this letter show no sign of surprise, no matter who may be present."

"The bearer of this, Buckskin Sam, will say he is from San Antonio, where I got into trouble, so sent for you to come to me."

"This is not so, as I am on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, and Sam will guide you to me."

"I wish you to come at once, for it is most important, and much hangs upon what you do in the matter."

"When I left the ranch I was ambushed, but I played a ruse and killed the man that set the trap for me."

"He proved to be a vile wretch from Utah, and one who is in league with a present member of your own household, and others, to carry out well-laid plans of evil, all of which you shall know when you come to me."

"Trust me implicitly, chief, and do not even let your right hand know what your left hand doeth."

"Tell your brother even, that you are going to San Antonio, and will be gone some ten days."

"Don't fail me, but should you be tempted to do so, take Buckskin Sam apart where there are no listeners and ask him to tell you why you must come."

"Sincerely and truly yours,

"COLORADO CARL."

Such was the letter, and not a trace of its contents did Bainbridge show in his face as he read it.

"Is Carl much hurt, Sam?" he asked, as Hall was unsaddling his horse for a rest and feed.

"Yes, sir, he's in trouble, and you had better not delay very long."

"All right. We will start in a couple of hours," and turning to his brother, he continued:

"Branch, I have to go to San Antonio, and will be gone at the least ten days, so please look after the ranch."

"I will write a couple of letters before I go which I wish you would send by Lucas to Ranch Retreat for me to-morrow."

"Very well, Mort; I'll attend to it for you; but I am sorry you are going, for the ranch is as lonely as a graveyard when you are gone."

The letters were written and left upon the desk for Branch Bainbridge to send the next day, and, after an early supper, the ranchero and Buckskin Sam mounted their horses and rode away.

Branch Bainbridge stood gazing after them until they had disappeared in the distance across the prairie, and then said, while a sinister expression swept over his face:

"Could anything have played into my hands better? This is a streak of luck I have not often struck; but why he did not take the four thousand dollars lately paid him for cattle, I cannot understand, as he was going direct to San Antonio, where he keeps his bank account."

"Now, I must not delay in what I have to do. If I do not win this game, I will deserve to hang for it."

"To-morrow at dawn I start for Mayhew's. His dinky can be christened Lucas and carry these important letters to Ranch Retreat," and a look of vicious devilry marred the handsome face of the man who was plotting some deep game of turpitude and evil to be played, regardless of consequences, upon a trusting brother.

CHAPTER IX.

ELDER MAYHEW AS A COWBOY.

BRANCH BAINBRIDGE was not a man to spare horseflesh, when anything important was to be done; so he kept the animal he rode at a canter for miles, after leaving Overlook Ranch.

His trail led toward the line of settlements, and after a ride of thirty miles he came in sight of a cabin upon a heavily wooded hill.

A small herd of cattle were feeding on the prairie below the cabin, and a score of horses were not far from them.

Straight on to the cabin rode Branch Bainbridge, up to a man cleaning a rifle, before the door. This person was small in stature, with full beard and long hair, and was dressed in buckskin.

"Well, captain, glad to see you. I suppose you have come to tell me about Amos."

"Has he not turned up yet, Mayhew?"

"No, captain, he has not."

"Well, maybe he has been killed. Did he have anything upon him to give you or me away?"

"Not that I know of, and I guess not; but do you think he has been killed?"

"If not, where is he?"

"You can answer that question best, captain, for you came here and got him to go on a little jaunt, as you told me when I met you at the rendezvous last, and I have not seen him since."

"It was to ambush a man who had a lot of money with him, and who was on his way to San Antonio to bank it. I told him to waylay the messenger at a certain place, and yet when I went there I could not find track nor trail that he had gone there, and I have not seen him since."

"Then, maybe he has bolted with the money?"

"If he would do so he did not get the chance, for he missed his man."

"Then his man got him, I guess."

"No; for word came from him yesterday from San Antonio."

"I can't understand it, captain."

"Nor I; but I hope he has not got anything on his person to compromise us, Mayhew, if he has been killed."

"I hope not, captain, but I don't know."

"Well, we must take no risks, and I have work ahead for you."

"I am at your command, captain."

"Where is Pete, your darky?"

Cowboy Mayhew gave a shrill whistle signal and soon a negro appeared, bearing a load of wood upon his broad shoulders.

"Pete, the captain wants you."

"Yes, boss."

"Yes, Pete, I wish to send you on a mission or errand, and, you black rascal, you are to be named Lucas, and play the part of an honest negro."

"Yas, boss, I once c'd play de part right smart, but I hain't so good now as I was."

"No, you have been contaminated by your association with Elder Amos, Elder Mayhew and myself."

"Boss, I hain't a word ter say ag'in' yer, for I recommembers how you gemmans saved me from bein' burnt up alive by de red Injuns, sah, and I is your sarvant ter command, sah, ever since."

"Well, Pete, I wish you to mount your horse, dress in your best, and go to Ranch Retreat for me."

"Yas, sah."

"You are to carry two letters, and you are to say that you come from Ranchero Bainbridge of Overlook Ranch."

"Yas, boss."

"Your name is to be Lucas."

"Maybe the elder would christen me ag'in, sah, 'cause Lucas am a nice name."

"I'll christen you if you make any mistake in the captain's errand, Pete, and you won't enjoy the christening."

"Like as not, boss."

"Well, Lucas, get ready and I'll rehearse you in what I wish you to do."

"Dey don't know dat Lucas nigger dere, do dey, boss?"

"No, he has never been there."

Pete gave a sigh of relief, for he was anxious as to what his reception would be if he were suspected of playing a part.

In a short while he was ready, dressed in his best rig, which was nothing to be proud of; but his weapons were good ones and he knew how to use them.

Then, too, he was well mounted.

Branch Bainbridge rehearsed him in all that he had to do, and Pete rode off on his mission, with orders to return there with the responses to the letters.

Try as they might in talking over the mysterious disappearance of the man they spoke of as Elder Amos, the two could not account for his not having returned to his cabin. Had he succeeded in killing Colorado Carl, they would have suspected that he had run off with the gold he got from the cowboy, preferring to have it all for himself; but this he had failed to do, so what had become of him they could not understand, and both were uneasy about it on their own account.

Branch Bainbridge remained all night at the cabin. The next day Pete put in an appearance, bearing the responses to the letters sent.

They were addressed to Mortimer Bainbridge, but Branch Bainbridge opened and read them, and then said:

"Pete, you have done well, so here is a gold-piece for you."

Turning to Mayhew he said:

"Elder, you know my plot, so get rid of your cattle at once, and the fourth day from this meet me at the Willow Forks."

"Yes, captain."

"Leave the secret signs for Amos, should he turn up and return home."

"I will, sir."

"And shave off that beastly beard of yours, cut your hair and rig up in your elder's togs, for

I have work for you to do that a cowboy cannot perform.

"Be sure to be at Willow Forks on time. I will be there in an ambulance and meet you."

"I will also take a relay of horses to a certain place, so that, should there be pursuit, we can take to the saddle and distance our foes."

"When we are safe I will tell you what my future plans are."

"Now I must be off."

And, mounting his horse, Branch Bainbridge rode rapidly away on the trail to Overlook Ranch.

CHAPTER X.

THE MISSION TO MEXICO.

"WELL, Buckskin Sam, what does this strange letter of Colorado Carl mean?" asked Mortimer Bainbridge, when he and the noted Texan scout were well on their way.

"I really know solittle, Mr. Bainbridge, about it all, that, as you are acting on Carl's letter, I will leave it for him to tell you."

"He came to my ranch the day after he left you and asked me to accompany him to the Rio Grande, and I did so."

"He told me he had been ambushed by a man whom he had fatally wounded, and the confession of the dying assassin had led him into a great secret."

"He certainly knew what he was about, and went to a point on the Rio Grande which he seemed to understand pretty well."

"There he left me for a couple of days alone in a snug little camping-place, and when he returned he had pen, ink and paper and wrote that letter to you."

"Had I not seen Colorado Carl at your ranch the several times I had been there and known how much you thought of him, I confess I would have been suspicious of his actions, for they were peculiar, to say the least; but he gave me an idea of a plot he had on hand that would be a desperate one to play through, yet would do a world of good, and so I came, as he requested, for you, pretending, as he asked me to do, that I had come from San Antonio, where I had left him in trouble."

"For any further information, Mr. Bainbridge, I prefer to let you go to Colorado Carl, for I confess I do not exactly understand the full situation, though I am into it now and will see you out."

Mortimer Bainbridge did not care to ask more. He knew that Buckskin Sam had been called in simply as the ally of Colorado Carl. He was not impatient; he could wait, and would do so.

So the two rode on, pressing their horses as hard as was consistent.

They were well prepared for camping, and when night came made themselves comfortable.

Buckskin Sam was a perfect trailer, and went on his way without hesitation, having taken his bearings, to use a nautical term, and arrived at the crossing of the Rio Grande which he had intended making, as surely as a sailor makes a given port.

Of course there had been danger from Comanches, and roving bands of outlaws, both Mexicans and Texans, but Buckskin Sam had steered clear of dangers, and if they had been forced to meet them, they were prepared for it.

After crossing the Rio Grande, the Texan guide turned to the right, up the stream, and headed away toward a wild and rugged range of mountains about two leagues distant.

A canyon penetrated this range, and at its entrance sat a horseman, evidently awaiting them.

It was Colorado Carl.

He rode forward and grasped the hand of the ranchero warmly, while he said:

"I have made you come a long way, sir, but the game is worth the hunt, I assure you, and you will say so, I feel certain, when you know all."

"Sam, you have made good time," and Carl led the way back into the canyon.

"My camp is a mile up the canyon, but I was on the lookout upon the range and saw you coming."

"Here we are," and he led the way into a cozy nook where there were water and grass in plenty, and a wicky-up wherein the cowboy had his sleeping quarters.

The tired horses were soon staked out and then Carl set to work and cooked a good supper, after which they sat down near the camp-fire for a smoke.

Still Mortimer Bainbridge had not asked why he had been sent for.

He bided the cowboy's time.

At last Carl said:

"Chief, I have given Sam an idea of what I am going to tell you, so he might be prepared to convince you that it was best for you to come, did you not heed my letter?"

"Yes, but I heeded your letter, and Sam preferred that you should make what explanation you wished, Carl."

"Well, sir, I've got to hurt you some, I know;

but then you must know the truth—the sooner now, the better."

"To have you fully understand the situation I must tell you something of myself."

"My father was chief of a detective agency in a large Northern city, and I grew up with a knack for solving hard cases."

"I was sent out West on several hunts, and was for a couple of years with General Dave Cook's Rocky Mountain Secret Service men, and there I got knowledge of border life."

"I had, in one instance, to kill a man, or be killed, and as there was no witness present but friends of the slain man, they swore my life away, stating that I had committed a cold-blooded murder."

"This was in an Eastern town, and I was sentenced to prison for life."

"I felt that I was innocent, so devoted my thoughts only to escape, and I did escape, and again joined the Rocky Mountain League."

"A case came up that was put into my hands. It was for me to find the wife of a rich New Yorker who had been lured from her home by Mormon elders."

"I spent a year on this case, and found the woman, restoring her to her husband, for she was sick of her terrible existence among the Saints. To accomplish my end I boldly became a Mormon Danite and joined that diabolical Secret League. There I saw men whose faces I can never forget, and three of those I have seen in Texas within the past few weeks."

"In Texas, Carl?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are now a member of this Mormon League?"

"I am supposed to be, at heart, sir, but I left the terrible League and came to Texas to escape them."

"Things went wrong with me, and I was being forced into a very evil life when I met you."

"I believed that you recognized me, and so I came with you."

"Recognized you?"

"Yes, sir; but I will explain."

"Arriving at your home, I discovered my mistake and that you were not the man I had met in Utah, but your brother was."

"Where did you meet him?"

"He seemed to recognize me, but I feigned ignorance of ever having seen him before; and more, I began to play my cards to win a game which I soon saw was going against you."

"Against me?"

"Yes, sir."

"But how? Explain yourself."

"Well, sir, I saw that your brother took frequent trips away from the ranch, hunting, and I tracked him."

"I was not long in finding out that, at different times, he met men who were supposed to be cowboys dwelling forty miles away. There were two of them, and a negro lived with them."

"These men I also knew, after a close look at them from ambush."

"Who were they?"

"Mormons, sir."

"Mormons?" asked Mortimer Bainbridge, in surprise.

"Yes, sir; they were Mormon elders, in the character of cowboy ranchers, for they had a few cattle, and they were apparently doing missionary work in a quiet way, trying to get the wives and daughters of Texans to return with them to Salt Lake City."

"By Heaven! but they deserve hanging."

"Yes, chief; and there is a band of them in Mexico, at a hacienda not ten miles from here. They, too, are in this missionary business, and only awaiting the arrival of their chief to start forth secretly with a couple of score of deluded women and girls."

"You know this to be so, Carl?"

"As I do, sir, that when I left your ranch word was sent to those cowboy elders to ambush and kill me; but I played a ruse that put the game in my own hands. I killed Elder Amos, and in dying he recognized me."

"Believing me one of the Danite band, and still bound by its terrible oaths, he gave me his money and papers, which I have, and was constrained to make this confession, which will astound you."

"I came on here, visited this Mexican camp, while Sam awaited me here."

"Then I returned, and sent Sam for you."

"But, what do you expect me to do, Carl?"

"To find out, sir, for yourself, who the Danite chief really is, and that a plot is arranged by him to rob you of your all."

"I wish to tell you, sir, that word was sent from this chief to Elder Amos to kill and rob me, as I was supposed to carry a considerable sum of your money to bank in San Antonio."

"I wish to tell you, Mr. Bainbridge, that this Danite chief is your own brother, Branch Bainbridge."

As Colorado Carl uttered the words, he fairly shrunk from the look turned upon him by the ranchero, who sprung to his feet like a tiger startled at danger.

Carl, too, sprung up at the menacing movement of the chief.

CHAPTER XI.
THE TEST.

COLORADO CARL almost regretted having made the accusation he had against Branch Bainbridge, when he saw the look upon the face of the ranchero.

At first it was a look of horror, but quickly changed into an expression of intensest anger.

The eyes fairly blazed and every particle of color left the strong, handsome face.

One moment he gazed upon Carl as though to look into his very heart, and then came the words, sharp, savage and determined:

"Colorado Carl, if you cannot prove the charge you make against my brother, I will kill you!"

Carl was no coward, and Buckskin Sam was ever fearless in his nature; but before the look and words of the ranchero they quailed, so terrible did he seem in his mighty rage.

With an effort Colorado Carl at last spoke:

"Chief, I told you when I first met you at Ranch Retreat that I believed I had seen you before, and that you were caring for me for that reason; but when I met your brother I saw my mistake, for in him I recognized Captain Branch, the Danite chief, when I was one of the League.

"I pretended, as I said, that I did not know him, and thereby I was able to watch him, for I knew he was playing some deep game, even against you, his brother.

"Thus it was I found out that he was allied with the two elders, and you may remember that he left the ranch the day before I departed, presumably for San Antonio.

"I followed him, and he it was who ordered Elder Amos to waylay me.

Believing me one of the League, though he cursed me as his slayer, Elder Amos told me much to tell the chief, Captain Branch, and gave me his signet ring and papers, all of which I have here.

"I went to the Mexican retreat which he directed me to, and those there wished much to communicate with the chief and have him come and give them orders to start to Utah.

"I told them that I would come for you, and I came here and sent Buckskin Sam.

"Now, my word for it, sir, you can enter that retreat, when I initiate you into certain signs and duties, and will be received as Captain Branch without a shadow of a doubt.

"If you dared risk it, you would have proof beyond my words that your brother is all I say he is, and more."

"Well, I dare go, Carl, and will do so whenever you are ready to start."

"To-morrow night, sir, we will say, then, for you must make no mistake in the signs and duties you will have to give and pass through, and by reading once the papers of Elder Amos you can get an insight into the orders under which they came here.

"Of course I did not speak of the death of Elder Amos, and you can wear his ring. Here it is."

"By Heaven! but my brother has one like it."

"If you are convinced, sir, do not take the risk of discovery."

"Yes, I will go, so let us get to work with what I have to learn," was the grim response of the ranchero.

The plan was soon arranged, and it was that Colorado Carl should return to the Mormon Mission in Mexico accompanied by Mortimer Bainbridge, who was to be known as Captain Branch, the Danite leader.

By a short stay in the mission Mortimer Bainbridge could discover if his brother was or was not the Danite chief, from his being treated as such, and he determined, so acting, to order the Mormon missionaries home without their converts and then dismiss the latter to their homes and save the unfortunate females from the cruel lives that would be in store for them as Mormon wives.

Then he would return to his ranch and at once place his brother under arrest, sending him to prison for his crimes as he deserved and where he could do no more harm or wrong.

The papers of Elder Amos which Colorado Carl had, showed letters from Branch Bainbridge, telling that he knew of an inheritance which his brother was to receive, and by getting rid of him he could get it himself, personating Mortimer Bainbridge.

The papers, in fact, were most compromising, for among them was a list of rancheros who were to be made the victims of Mormon plots, but written in pencil the names were mostly erased.

With such evidence, and what he could glean from the mission people as to the supposed chief, Bainbridge felt that he could act against his brother in a manner that would prevent further harm.

He had befriended him in the past, he had forgiven all his base crimes against him, and once more had taken him by the hand, to find that he was nursing a viper in his bosom. Now he would be merciless!

The signs and duties of his position, taught him by Colorado Carl, he proved a most apt pupil in learning, and his nerve was such that should he make a mistake, neither the cowboy

nor Buckskin Sam dreaded any evil result, for he would extricate himself from it by his coolness, they were sure.

The next morning Bainbridge arose, calm yet courteous as usual, though his haggard face showed his comrades that he had suffered deeply.

He rehearsed his lesson of countersigns, grips and duties as a Danite chief, without a miss, and mounting their horses the two men rode away toward the mission, leaving Buckskin Sam to await their coming back in the camp.

The mission was in a secluded range of mountains, and was at the hacienda of a Mexican who had leanings toward Mormonism.

The proselyting elders of the Mormon faith had gone about their work quietly, and in their insidious way had won a number of women and children to leave their homes and hide in the hacienda retreat until they could make their way to Utah.

There was some excitement in the towns and country about these desertions of their homes by women and young girls, and hints had gone abroad that Mormon elders were at the bottom of it, and the latter were anxious to get the word from their chief to start on the northward trail with their deluded victims.

They therefore anxiously awaited the coming of Captain Branch, who was chief of the southern band of Danites, to move.

A sentinel was kept on duty on a spur a mile from the hacienda, and when he signaled that two horsemen were approaching, and one was the Danite scout known as Bugler Charlie, and the other doubtless the chief.

As they drew near the outpost he challenged, and Mortimer Bainbridge answered with the Danite signals, so they were bidden advance, and rode on to the hacienda, the sentinel saluting politely as they went by, and remarking:

"The elders will be delighted to see you, chief, at the hacienda."

Mortimer Bainbridge made no reply, but upon reaching the hacienda gates was met by the elder in charge, and as he went through the signs always made upon two dignitaries meeting, Colorado Carl muttered to himself:

"I am proud of him; but now it is life or death for both of us."

CHAPTER XII.
A TRYING ORDEAL.

"THAT is Elder Sterling," whispered Carl, as the head man of the mission came forward and greeted the supposed Danite chief.

There was no hesitation in the elder's manner, no look of doubt as to the man he met, and he said pleasantly:

"I am glad you have come, Captain Branch. You must excuse my sending for you, but we all deemed it best, as matters are getting threatening."

"I had not expected any trouble, Elder Sterling, and I have been engaged over in Texas, so could not come before. But we will talk the situation over as soon as I have read certain important papers placed in my hands on my way hither."

The other elders now came forward, four of them, and the supposed Danite greeted them cordially, but with a dignity that was marked, and held them to a certain extent aloof.

The Mexican who owned the hacienda gave him a warm welcome, and a hearty supper was prepared, when Bainbridge met the deluded creatures who had been won over to believe the Mormon faith.

After the meal the pretended Danite went to his room, where Carl joined him.

"Are you convinced, chief?"

"I am thoroughly so, Carl, and I have much to thank you for."

"Don't mention it, for the work is just begun, sir. But what will you do?"

"Use these papers taken from Elder Amos to break up this infamous gang and send them flying in fright back to Utah."

"Can you do it, sir?"

"Send them to me and see."

Carl departed, and soon returned accompanied by Elder Sterling and the others.

Bainbridge was pacing the room with seeming excitement of manner, his hands clasped tightly upon a lot of papers.

"Gentlemen, there is something to appall us ahead, as I have just read my dispatches. Elder Amos has been slain, and his papers taken by his enemies, while the Rangers of Texas and Rio Grande Lanceros of Mexico are now upon our track, and within twenty-four hours every avenue of escape will be cut off.

"We dare not go together, but must depart alone and meet at some point up in New Mexico; but straight for Utah we must depart. Señor Miranda will have to send these converts back to their homes to await another summons."

"But, chief, can we not take them with us?" asked Elder Sterling, who, with the others had turned white with fear at the startling news.

"You can, if you will run the risk of being hanged by the Rangers if taken and the converts freed after all, while the Governments of the United States and Mexico will take a hand in the matter."

"The risk is great, chief, but—"

"Well, here is Bugler Charlie to guide you,

and no better guide or braver man lives, so get your converts together and start at once."

"I'd not go for ten thousand dollars cash in hand. I am no fool to have the Rangers hang me, or the Mexicans torture me to death, dearly as I love the faith," declared Colorado, decisively.

That settled it, for the elders cried almost in chorus:

"It is best that we leave the converts, Brother Sterling—far better."

"Such is my opinion; for, remember, Elder Amos has been put to death, and your names are booked, with a complete description of you, and in twenty-four hours it will be too late. I myself shall leave as soon as I see you depart in safety."

The elders were all in a tremor. Securing converts for the Mormon faith was one thing, but to die for the cause was quite another.

These men were simply presbyters, to spread the Mormon creed. The one they looked to in danger was the Danite chief, so they yielded to him in all things.

Seeing that he had frightened the elders, Señor Miranda was sent for.

He was a grizzly-looking old Mexican, who had run through two fortunes, and whose only child, a son, had followed in his father's footsteps in dissipation and extravagance.

There was a large inheritance to go to this son, Lieutenant Monte Miranda, of the Lanceros, but upon certain conditions only, and which neither the old señor nor the ex-officer—for he had been forced out of the army—saw much chance of getting possession of.

The Señor Miranda was leaning toward the Mormon faith because it paid him well to do so, and he took all ordinary risks.

His home was far from any other, and he lived away from his fellow-men to such an extent that few knew, what he was about.

All sorts of stories were told about him, but no one cared to discover if they were true or not, so long as the Government did not interfere, and officers of the Mexican River Rangers, who went to the hacienda to gamble with the old man, never reported anything wrong there.

And yet the cunning old Mexican had set the Mormon elders upon the trail of the very ones most likely to be won over to the faith, and had given them a secure hiding-place at his home until they could depart for Utah.

When told the situation the Señor Miranda was terrified, for Bainbridge was careful to pretend to read out that a search of the hacienda was to be made for kidnapped women and children.

This so alarmed the ancient reprobate that he was most anxious to get rid of the elders, and at once ordered his trusted peons to prepare to depart that night with the converts, for the dawn must not find one present in his hacienda.

Bainbridge then presented the case to the converts themselves, and that many were glad to return to their homes he at once discovered, and they decided to lay their kidnapping upon the Rio Grande Bandits, and state that they had been rescued by Texans.

Bainbridge cared nothing for what excuse they gave for their return, so long as they did return, and yet he saw that a number really regretted not being able to go on to Utah with the elders.

The result of all this was that the elders, well mounted and armed, and pretending to be prospectors, departed within an hour after their first fright; and, needless to say, Colorado Carl never let a chance go to urge them to greater haste and throw in a few stories of the terrible Texans, who had captured Mormon prisoners.

Soon after the departure of the alarmed elders, under a peon guide from the hacienda, half a dozen separate mounted parties rode away from their headquarters.

They were the converts, guided by peons, and who were to make their way to a certain town by separate trails, and once there, their guides would leave them and they could tell their own story about being kidnapped by Mexican outlaws and rescued by Texans, who sent them across to their own shores.

It was just midnight when Bainbridge and Carl mounted their horses and rode away from the hacienda.

"Well, chief, that was a fearful ordeal, but your nerve saved you, and you did more good than I believed possible," averred Carl.

"I did what I believed was right, Carl."

"And you'll never catch another of those fellows in this country again. But now, will you return home at once, sir?"

"I will go by Ranch Retreat, Carl, the home of Colonel Noland, for it will be nearer, and you can go with Sam to his ranch, and I will stop there for you upon my way home."

"And Captain Branch, the Danite, sir?"

"I shall put him in irons and send him to prison thus," was the stern response.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CHIP OF THE OLD BLOCK.

HARDLY had Bainbridge and Colorado Carl departed from the hacienda of Don Miranda, when a loud hail was heard at the gate.

The Don was just congratulating himself upon the departure of all his guests, which would leave him uncompromised should the Lancers or Rangers call, and had begun to drink a bottle of wine as a "nightcap," when the hail at the gate startled him.

He pictured to himself an arrival of Lancers, and of course felt sure that the converts had been seen by them, perhaps the elders captured.

The Don was positively unnerved, until a servant came in and told him that a traveler begged hospitality for the night.

The old man was so pleased that it was not as his fears had conjured up, he responded:

"Show him in and get refreshments at once."

The stranger entered. He was clad in buckskin, and looked like a man past the meridian of life, for his long beard and hair were iron-gray.

"You are welcome, señor. My servant has gone for refreshments for you. Be seated," commanded the Don, in Spanish.

"I ought to be welcome, seeing that this is my own home," was the reply, and the stranger with a harsh laugh threw himself into an easy-chair.

"Monte, my son! Is it you?" cried the Don, in amazement.

"Yes, father; but when the peon is gone we will talk in English, for they cannot understand that, and you know I have risked much to come into Mexico."

"Yes, you foolish boy; you threw your rank away and your chances for a famous fortune."

"Don't lecture me, señor, for following in the footsteps of my father."

"You are an impudent boy."

"I am a chip of the old block, as we say in the United States, father; but here comes the peon, and I hope you will have him bring some of my favorite Muscatella, for I am painfully thirsty."

The peon was given his orders, and when he returned with the extra bottles, the Don ordered him to retire, saying that he himself would show the guest to his room.

Then he turned to the disguised young man and demanded:

"Now tell me why you took such chances and came home?"

Monte arose and fastened the door; then, throwing off his wig and false beard, he stood revealed as a dark-faced, but strikingly handsome young man of twenty-five.

"It is a relief to get off that trumpery," he said, with hardly any foreign accent in his speech.

He poured out a glass of wine and dashed it off, which act he repeated until he had emptied three glasses, when he turned to the refreshments and began to eat with a gusto that showed he was hungry as well as thirsty.

The Don watched him in silence. He really loved the boy, in his peculiar way, and had been once very proud of him; but when he saw him following in his footsteps of extravagance and dissipation—yes, even worse—he began to feel what it was to have such a son, and his conscience pricked him when too late to undo the evil he had done.

"Well, Don, I have come home, for I suppose I may still call this old bat-roost by the endearing name of home, to have a talk with you."

"You are becoming filial as you grow older, Monte."

"I am becoming poorer, for I am out at the soles, elbows and knees, or will be soon, for just now I happen to be in funds from some winnings I made in New Orleans."

"You see, my luck changed with my last peso, and I won steadily up to a thousand dollars, when I had the good sense, for once in my life to quit."

"I came to San Antonio, bought a horse and outfit there, and struck out for home, changing myself into an aged man at my first camp."

"So here I am and with but three hundred pesos in my pocket to bless myself with."

"You would have had a fortune if you had behaved differently."

"Yes; and had you led a different life, Don, you would have had a fortune to leave me."

"Your grandfather has left you one."

"Yes, and it is of that I wish to talk to you."

"Well?"

"He left me a fortune on conditions."

"I know it."

"The conditions are that I am to marry the daughter of your sister, who married that American officer."

"Yes."

"If I marry her then we are to share equally the enormous fortune left by my grandfather."

"True."

"If I do not then we both lose the fortune, which goes to the church."

"You understand the terms of the will thoroughly, my son."

"Why was your father such an old fool as to make such a will, Don?"

"He did not approve of his daughter marrying any one other than a Mexican, and as she died he wished to force her only child to marry a Mexican, thus bringing her back into the fold."

"I see; but I have been almost brought up as

it were in the United States, and am as much an American as I am a Mexican."

"Your grandfather did not know that, luckily for you."

"I do not see where the luck is, for I cannot get the fortune."

"Why?"

"Oh, the girl was educated in New York, while her father was stationed upon the northern frontier."

"I went to see her and told her I was her loving cousin, Monte Miranda, and all that, but she treated me without the slightest show that I impressed her."

"Strange."

"I then told her the terms of the will, and that I would visit her when she graduated."

"Yes?"

"She coolly told me that I need not come."

"So you will not go?"

"Bless your soul, Don, I have been."

"Again?"

"Yes, for she is at a frontier post with her father."

"I took good care to go when the major was absent on a trip up on the Columbia River, and she received me coldly, yet not unkindly, for she had to do so."

"All believed me to be her old lover, yet I did not speak of being her cousin."

"I passed some days at the fort and urged, entreated, threatened, but all to no purpose, for she would not consent to marry me."

"She knows you."

"That is just it, for she got hold of the Mexican papers some time ago after my escapades, and has read me up."

"Too bad."

"It is more than bad."

"Well, why don't you kidnap the girl and marry her by force?"

"Father, you have a great head, for I never thought of that."

"Then, too, the will reads that if either one of the heirs should die, the other will get the fortune."

"Ah! another idea."

"Yes, for if she did not marry you, she might die, you know, and as the master of that estate you could return to Mexico and snap your fingers at your prosecutors."

"That is so; gold in such quantity would buy me position and caste once more."

"It certainly would, I am assured."

"It is worth trying, and so my advice is to win the girl by fair means, if you can; if not kidnap her and force her marry you."

"And failing in either?"

"Then see that she dies young."

"Don, what an old villain you are."

"You mean that in a complimentary way of course?"

"Certainly, for I recognize your great genius, if it is for evil."

"But I am glad I came to see you, for I wished to discover all I could about this will, and ask your advice upon the subject, as to what it was best for me to do."

"You have my advice without any mincing matters."

"I have, and as it chimes in with my humor, Don, I shall follow it."

"Now how much money can you advance me to start in on my new adventure?"

"I am cramped for funds myself."

"Yes, you always are; but there is a speculation that is very near a certainty, and you will get your loan back tenfold."

"I shall have to chance it; but how much do you want?"

"A thousand will do if I cannot get more."

"I'll try and scrape that sum together tomorrow; but what do you do for a living?"

"Gamble, trade horses, or steal one now and then, borrow from any man who stands and delivers at the word when covered—oh! I am not very particular."

"So I would judge, when you have developed into a highwayman; but it is getting late, so we will retire, and to-morrow night you must go, for it is neither safe for you to be here, nor for me to have you under my roof."

"Don't forget your wig and false beard in the morning. The west room is yours, and you know where it is. Good-night!"

The Don sought his own chamber, leaving his delectable son still enjoying his potatoes.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TWO "SKELETONS."

THE scene now comes back to Ranch Retreat, the home of Colonel Noland, whose beautiful daughter he had believed happy as the wife of Mortimer Bainbridge.

It will be remembered that Mortimer Bainbridge had arrived at the ranch in the afternoon, to the amazement of Colonel Noland, and that where he had expected a happy welcome, he discovered that Jessie had gone, as her father supposed, with himself.

It was hard, very hard for him to comprehend the situation as it was in all its bearings; he seemed fairly dazed by the terrible tidings.

His brother he had never mentioned to either the colonel or to Jessie, and the thought that

he could play a game so bold and awful he had not believed.

That he had an evil heart he well knew, and in recalling the past he felt that not one act of his brother's had ever been even friendly toward him.

When he had taken him to his home, sharing with him his fortune, he had believed that Branch Bainbridge would then lead a different life.

Colorado Carl had opened his eyes as to what he really was, and yet base as he believed him to be as the Danite chief, and plotting against him, he found it almost impossible to believe that he had been so vile as to decoy poor Jessie into his trap.

Pacing the floor for a long time after the frightful story was unfolded to him, Mortimer Bainbridge at last turned to Colonel Noland, and his voice and manner were perfectly calm.

Terrible as was the effort, he had gained complete mastery of himself.

"Colonel Noland, I have never spoken of my past to you or to poor Jessie, nor of my brother, for there was only pain and sorrow in the remembrance."

"My family was a proud one, and wealthy, too, and my parents' whole lives were wrapped up in my brother and myself."

"He, Branch, was my twin, and so much alike we were that when baptized a young lady, in sport, took the ribbons blue and red from our arms that designated us, and from that day it was never known whether I was christened Mortimer or Branch, and it became guess-work ever after."

"Branch, as my brother was called, with the hope that he was so christened, possessed an evil nature. He was wild, cruel and vindictive, and when I loved a young lady whom he had sought to win and was engaged to her, he made charges against me that caused her to break the engagement, but in which there was not even the shadow of truth."

"Afterward, having nearly beggared my parents, who meekly yielded to his demands for money to gamble away, he committed a crime, a double one of murder and robbery, laid his plans for suspicion to fall upon me, and I was sent to prison for life."

"My God! Bainbridge, can this be true?"

"Every word, sir; and I am telling you all to show you how I have suffered, and to palliate any act I may now do against Branch Bainbridge."

"Feeling guiltless, I escaped and traveled in foreign lands, a fugitive, until recalled by my lawyer, who told me that my brother's accomplice in the crime had made full confession."

"This exonerated me, of course, but I was heartsore, and selling the plantation left me by my grandmother, with a score of the faithful old slaves who followed my fortunes, I came to Texas to hide away from all who knew me."

"One night Branch Bainbridge came to my home, and I ordered him away; but he pleaded so pitifully for forgiveness and seemed so repentant, a humor I had never seen him in before, that I forgave him and shared with him my fortune and home."

"I had no suspicion of evil still dwelling in his heart against me, until Colorado Carl, the man whom I wounded here the night of the attack on your home, you remember, got leave to go to Mexico."

"Soon after Buckskin Sam, the Ranger Scout, came to my home pretending that Colorado Carl was in trouble in San Antonio, and he brought a letter calling me to him."

"I went, and, good God! the discovery I made nearly maddened me."

For some time Mortimer Bainbridge did not speak, he was so deeply moved.

But he resumed again, and in the same calm tone as before his outburst of his last few words:

"I will tell you all that I discovered, Colonel Noland, on my trip to Mexico, and you may judge how deep the iron entered into my soul by the discovery, while now, to find that black shadow of my life, my twin brother, has robbed you of your beautiful child, me of the one I loved dearest of all in my life, turns my very soul to bitterness, my heart to hatred, and causes me to vow before high Heaven to avenge the wrong cast upon your daughter."

Then did Mortimer Bainbridge tell the story of his discovery in Mexico of his brother's crime, and that he was a Danite chief of the Mormons.

Colonel Noland fairly writhed under the disclosure, as though suffering bodily anguish, but at last said:

"Bainbridge, your sorrow is as deep as my own, Heaven knows."

"I, too, have had sorrows in the past; and, strange to say, the woman who caused all my unhappiness was the twin sister of my wife."

"She loved me, if I must confess it, and placed such obstacles in the way of my union with her sister that I planned for a runaway match. This I carried out, for one night I left the home of the woman I loved, drove to a distant town and was married, not to her, as I believed, but to her twin sister!"

"She had discovered the plot, had given her sister a drug at supper that put her into a deep

slumber, and then had taken her place, and not once did I suspect the cheat until the next day she confessed her crime, so perfect was the resemblance between them. She even wore her sister's jewelry, rings and clothing.

"Bainbridge, I very nearly felled her to the earth with a blow, and then and there left her, at once putting in a plea for a divorce.

"After months of delay it was granted, and then I married the woman I loved, Jessie's mother.

"But, alas! that vile woman had vowed revenge because I cast her off, and our boy, a bright child of two years, died under suspicious circumstances. I am sure my wife suspected her sister, as the cause of the death of her boy. It told terribly upon her.

"Soon after Jessie was born, and when she was six years of age, my wife died.

"I was so sure she had been poisoned that I intended to have that woman arrested; so she suspecting my intention, boldly accused me of the poisoning. I was arrested, sent to prison, stood my trial and was acquitted.

"Then I left old scenes and associations, with my child, and traveled, for I feared for Jessie's life.

"At last this fear made me morbid, and when Jessie graduated I came here to dwell, to hide.

"Now you know the skeleton in my closet, and yet I would rather that poor Jessie had been murdered, than to suffer the fate she has."

"Yes, a thousand times more, Colonel Noland; but, I swear to you that she shall be avenged, for to-morrow I start upon the trail of this Danite miscreant," and Mortimer Bainbridge looked like a man who had suddenly become as merciless as a wounded tiger.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE DANITES' TRAIL.

THE ranch which Buckskin Sam made his home when not on the trail, lay a little to the right of the way between Ranch Retreat and the place of Mortimer Bainbridge, and thither had Colorado Carl gone with the scout to await the coming of the ranchero.

There Bainbridge found them the next day, resting after their trip into Mexico and back.

As he rode up to the ranger scouts' humble cabin, both of the men saw by the white and haggard face of the ranchero that something had happened to change him so, for he seemed to have aged ten years in the few hours since they had seen him, and it could not be from the discovery of his brother's treachery and that he was a Danite, bitter as that was to hear.

He greeted them pleasantly, however, and said:

"Sam, I believe you are so engaged here in Texas as not to be able to make an extended trip?"

"A week or two I can always arrange for, chief."

"Yes, but I may have a trail on hand that will take months, my friend."

"You know I am an officer of the Rangers, and then, too, I have some small ranch interests here I cannot leave very long; but I will be glad to give you all of my time that I can spare."

"No, I will not ask it, and Carl and myself will go on the trail together—eh, Carl?"

"To the end of it, chief," was the ready reply.

"Well, Sam, you can help me by taking up your quarters at my ranch as manager there, driving your cattle over to herd with mine, and letting your friends know where to find you.

"You must make yourself at home as though master in reality, and I will see to it that you are well remunerated for your services."

"I think the living in such pleasant quarters, chief, will fully repay me, and if my cattle and cowboy pard can go with me, I am satisfied."

"Then you will go?"

"Willingly."

"Then I will send several of my men to drive your cattle over, and an ambulance for your traps, for there is no telling how long I shall be gone, for, as Carl said, we are going to the end of the trail."

"I don't doubt that, sir."

"And, Sam, I wish you to see my old friend Colonel Noland once a week or so, for he is in distress, as his daughter has been taken from him."

"Dead! Miss Jessie dead?"

"No! I wish to God she was, for, my friends, while we were in Mexico, my brother wrote her a letter, forging my writing, in place of the one I was to send to her and her father, and told her that he, pretending to be myself, was to go North on business, which would keep me away for weeks, and asked her to become my—his—wife."

"He appointed a day to come for her, accompanied by a clergyman, and he sent the letters by a negro, who pretended to be Lucas, from Overlook."

"My friends, he arrived at the time specified, in my ambulance, driving my best pair of mules, and the negro who carried the letters drove, while a clergyman accompanied him, my brother."

"They were married, for no one doubted but

that Branch Bainbridge was myself, and they have gone North, leaving one week ago."

"My God! this is terrible!" cried Buckskin Sam, excitedly.

"Chief, did they describe the preacher?"

"Yes, Carl, a large man with short hair, smooth-shaven face, and dressed in clerical garb."

"Elder Mayhew and Elder Amos lived together, and had a negro with them."

"I killed Amos, so I wonder if it was not Mayhew and the darky," Colorado Carl said.

"We can find out by going to their ranch, which is twenty miles from here," Buckskin Sam suggested.

"Then, let us start at once, for I have much to do, and am anxious to be on the trail."

"I hope you will not be too late, chief."

"Ah, Sam, they were wedded, whoever was the minister, and the poor girl has been victimized, but I will not be too late to avenge her," and the look that accompanied the words convinced Carl and Buckskin Sam that Mortimer Bainbridge was stirred to his inmost soul.

In a short while they were in the saddle, Buckskin Sam's cowboy pard had orders to pack up the traps in the cabin and be ready to move to Overlook when the ambulance should arrive.

It was just sunset when they reached the cabin of the Mormon cowboys, and all seemed deserted.

With a heavy blow of his foot the ranchero dashed in the door, and that the occupants had deserted the place was evident.

Building a fire, they camped there for the night, and Colorado Carl cooked one of his tempting suppers, which the ranchero ate with a relish, his two companions were glad to see.

But Bainbridge was determined to keep up his strength, seeming to know what was before him.

At dawn they were in the saddle again, and before noon arrived at Overlook.

To inquiries Dixie, the confidential negro servant of the ranchero, told him that Branch Bainbridge had reported that he, Mortimer, had been wounded, and he was to take the ambulance and the finest pair of mules after him.

Since his departure nothing had been heard of him, and the cowboys were just thinking of going in search of the ranchero when they saw him coming.

And Dixie added:

"And he fixed up mighty fine for the trip, sah, and got wife Cinthy to get a lot of things for him, he said to make you comfortable, and she cooked provisions enough to last a week."

"All right, Dixie, I am not wounded, as you see; but I am going on a long trail, and I wish you and your wife Cinthy to go with me."

"Get a tent and a number of other things together, which I will tell you, and I wish the four-mule ambulance, and will take four horses, for you wish two along as well as I, Carl."

"Yes, sir."

"And, Dixie, don't fail to get my rifles and revolvers in the best of trim, with plenty of ammunition for them."

"Yas, Mars' Mort, I'll do it, sah, and we will be glad to go, Cinthy an' me, for I sees you is in trouble, sah."

"We must get off to-morrow morning, Dixie," and then the ranchero walked over to his private desk, unlocked it and said quietly:

"He has robbed me of my money, too; but fortunately I have plenty more in a place he knew nothing about."

There was no show of anger and excitement in his manner; but his calmness was more terrible than an outburst of temper would have been.

The cowboys were called together that night and told of the ranchero's going upon an extended trip, no more, and that Buckskin Sam, the Ranger Scout, would remain at the ranch.

The negroes were also told of the trip, and seemed to think that their master was going away to bring a bride back with him, from the preparations made, and the fact that Cinthy was going along, too, with Dixie.

It was just sunrise when the ranchero bade Buckskin Sam good-by as they reached the prairie, where the scout was to turn back, and that afternoon they reached Ranch Retreat.

After a few hours' rest, they started upon their way, Dixie driving the ambulance and Cinthy riding with him, the extra horses being led behind the vehicle.

Much as he desired to go, Colonel Noland was unable to do so, and so he remained at the earnest entreaty of the ranchero.

When they turned out of the gate of Ranch Retreat, it was to follow upon the broad trail left by the ambulance of the Danite chief.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LOST TRAIL.

THE trail left by the daring Danite there had seemed no disposition on his part to cover up.

He had driven along at a good pace, as the tracks showed, and the first night's camp was found not over twenty miles from Ranch Retreat.

It was passed in silence by Mortimer Bainbridge, while Carl went about taking notes.

Darkness coming on a few miles beyond caused

the party to halt, and "Aunt Cinthy" prepared a good supper, while Dixie looked after his mules.

Carl staked the horses out, and the ranchero pitched the little "A" tent for himself and his companion, leaving the ambulance for the negroes.

Half the night the ranchero stood guard, the other half Carl took his place, and so the first long day and night on the Danite's trail passed away, the party having entered into a perfect system from the beginning.

The next day the pace was slower, not to press the animals too hard, and not over thirty miles were made.

The third day the horses were hitched up in the place of the mules, which were thereby given resting spells under the saddle.

So the pace was kept up for a week, the trail of the ambulance they followed keeping plain and readily discernible.

They had passed through some dangerous country, had flanked several bands of redskins, who were without doubt hostile, and one day had a brush with a score of mounted warriors, who quickly drew off when they discovered what kind of game they had sprung.

As they neared Santa Fé, they camped one afternoon earlier than usual, to give their animals a better rest.

The ranchero strolled on ahead on foot, still following the trail of the ambulance, and started as he discovered a grave, newly made, upon one side, some distance off.

Had he not just then happened to glance in that direction, it would not have caught his eye.

Quickly he walked toward it, and saw that it had been made within the past ten days.

Returning to his camp, he told Colorado Carl of his discovery, and the two, taking a spade and shovel from the ambulance, hastened back to the grave.

The ranchero was deathly pale, but very calm, and went to work throwing out the earth from the grave with the remark:

"Heaven grant it be she."

Carl worked hard also, and soon the body was found.

As it was disclosed to their gaze, Colorado Carl said:

"It is Elder Mayhew!"

"The Mormon cowboy?"

"Yes, sir."

"It was he, then, who was the pretended clergyman?"

"Yes, sir, but he has the authority, you know, to marry people."

"Under the laws of the Mormon church?"

"Yes, chief."

"Is not that a ring on his finger?"

"It is his signet ring."

"Perhaps it would be well to search him."

"It will, and to take his ring, for I have the one I got from Elder Amos, and this one may come in useful I have an idea."

"It may, yes—oh! see this wound!"

"Yes, a knife-thrust in the back."

"The man was assassinated?"

"Yes, chief, he knew too much for Captain Branch, so was gotten rid of."

"That is my opinion, and he was taken un-awares."

"He was, for Elder Mayhew was not a man to easily master; but I find nothing about him to tell us more, and Captain Branch doubtless searched him, but overlooked the ring."

"Yes, and as he was a Danite, I shall lose no pity over him, but we must fill in the grave decently again."

This was done, and the two returned to camp where Cinthy had supper ready for them.

The next night they drove into Santa Fé.

Thus far the trailers had had a trail to follow, for there had been no rain, and the track of the ambulance of the Danite had been plainly visible along the way, while, knowing the way they were making would take them to the neighborhood of Santa Fé, neither Mortimer Bainbridge nor Colorado Carl had felt any anxiety thus far about losing the tracks of the pursued.

But in Santa Fé it was different, and by questioning alone could they discover if the Danite and the unfortunate Jessie were still in the town or had gone on elsewhere.

The Mormon elder lay in his grave back on the trail, so the inquiries would have to be made for a white man and a negro, accompanied by a lady, arriving in Santa Fé in an ambulance drawn by a pair of large black mules.

Perhaps the negro also lay in a grave back upon the trail, as did Elder Mayhew; but if so, neither the ranchero nor Colorado Carl had discovered it, so they must consider the negro as being still with the ambulance.

The ranchero arranged to enter Santa Fé after nightfall, desiring to attract as little attention as was possible, and he drove to the best hotel, which Colorado Carl knew well.

Making inquiries of the landlord they found that no such persons as those they were trailing had stopped with him; but the tracks of the ambulance had led into the trail to Santa Fé miles back, and several persons asked, who dwelt on the road, reported such a vehicle as described as having passed on toward the town.

Colorado Carl made a run around to the different hotels, but returned with the information that they had not stopped at any tavern in Santa Fé.

"He has wished to avoid publicity, so has gone to some place he knows, doubtless a Mormon's," said Carl.

The next morning the search was to begin, and as the ranchero was about to leave the hotel a man was passing who bowed to him and then said:

"Did you secure the horses you wished, señor, for I can accommodate you now, I think."

In an instant the ranchero saw that he was mistaken for his brother, so said:

"I will go with you to look at the animals you speak of."

"Come, Carl."

They at once walked off with the man, who was a horse-dealer, and he led them to his yards some distance away.

"I was sorry I had nothing better in the the other day, señor, and now as I have we can trade for your two mules and ambulance, perhaps."

"Doubtless we can," and the ranchero gave Colorado Carl a knowing glance, for "two mules and an ambulance" were just what they wished to find.

"Did I ask you, señor, about the trails northward when I saw you the other day—last week it was, I believe?"

"Yes, señor, just twelve days ago it was that you were here, and I supposed that you had left town."

"Not yet; but about the roads?"

"Well, señor, I should advise, as you said you had a lady along, and only three in the party, that you keep the river right on up into Colorado, branching off at Spanish Peaks, where you will strike the broad trail to Denver."

"Yes, I guess that is the safest way; but I think I shall want more horses than I spoke of the other day."

"You said then you would need two pack-animals and three saddle-horses."

"Yes, but I shall want four pack-animals now and four saddle-horses, and they must be the very best."

"They shall be, señor; but you will wish saddles and—"

"No, I have bridles, saddles and all necessary traps."

They had now reached the yards, and the horses were shown and selected.

Then the ambulance and mules were brought around by Carl, and a trade made, the trader remarking:

"I understand that you said two mules."

"No, four, as you see; but I will pay you a liberal price to hold them and the ambulance for me for three months, for I may return this way."

The bargain was soon arranged, and that night the party rode out of Santa Fé, confident that the Danite had gone up to Denver.

Cinthy had rigged up in male attire, and with a laugh she told the ranchero, as she mounted her horse, that it seemed like old times on the plantation, when she was a girl.

The pack-horses, bearing the ambulance load, were tied together and led by Dixie, and the party were again on the trail.

The next morning they came to a ranch, and the owner told them that the party they were following had passed there just two weeks before.

But from that place all trace of them was lost, and try as they might, the Danites' trail could not be found.

CHAPTER XVIII.

COLORADO CARL HAS A SUSPICION.

It certainly was tedious work following the trail of the Danite, but not once did either the ranchero or Colorado Carl despair.

They took matters coolly, camped early, did not push their horses, and made no move from the beaten track that was not well thought over.

At the place where the Danite had last been seen it was naturally supposed that, if going to Denver, he would hold on along the main trail.

But at the scattering ranches beyond for a day's ride, nothing had been seen of him.

Then travelers on the trails were met and questioned, and all returned the same answer, that they had seen no such persons as described.

Others had been seen, but none answering to the Danite and those with him.

At last the ranchero suggested that the Danite had taken the trail branching off through the San Luis valley, and thence on to Spanish Peaks."

"I will ride back and strike that trail, chief, and follow it until I discover if he went that way; but I do not think so."

"Why not, as a Mormon?"

"I'll give you my views later on that point, chief; but I'll soon know if he took the San Luis trail," and while the ranchero went into camp with the negroes, Colorado Carl took one of the pack-horses, bearing the lightest weight, and returned a dozen miles on the trail.

The next day he returned and reported that

he had gone a score of miles along the San Luis trail and had met a score of travelers, not one of whom had seen the persons described.

"Now, Carl, I'll tell you what I have discovered," said the ranchero.

"Yes, chief."

"Half a dozen cavalry soldiers under a sergeant, passed here yesterday, and I questioned them closely."

"And with what result, sir?"

"Of the different parties they had met, or seen, there was one of three white men, a boy and an Indian."

"That certainly is not our party."

"That is where I differ with you, Carl."

"I confess I am in the dark as to why you do, chief."

"Well, this group were met by the soldiers at the head of the Grand River, and, as I said, there were three men, a boy and an Indian."

"I questioned the soldiers and they told me that the Indian was painted most gorgeously, that two of the men were Santa Fé guides, and the other was dressed in buckskin and wore a beard, while the boy was handsome enough to be a woman."

"I see."

"Now the trader in Santa Fé told us that Branch Bainbridge was searching for two guides, more for safety, as an additional number, for you remember he added that if I had not secured such men he could recommend two good fellows who knew the country."

"Yes, I remember his speaking of your having asked him about two guides, or escorts, and that he had two he could vouch for."

"Well, why should those two not be the guides he obtained, the man in buckskin, the Danite, the Indian, the negro painted up to resemble one, for you said he was not very dark-skinned, and the boy he poor Jessie forced to don male attire?"

"Chief, I believe you are right, so we will on straight for the head-waters of the Grand tomorrow," returned Colorado Carl.

Again the trail was resumed, and three days after a party of hunters were met, who, when asked if they had seen such parties as the ranchero had described, one answered:

"I think you ought to know, sir, for you were along with them."

"I?"

"Yes, you or your twin brother, for the man who seemed the leader of the party was your exact image, though differently dressed."

"He is my twin brother, sir, and that is why I am anxious to overtake him."

"When did you see them, and where, please tell me?"

"They were camped on the Green River, not far from Mormon Crossing, resting, for their cattle were pretty well used up."

"And when?"

"Just a week ago to-day."

"Thank you, sir," and the trailers rode on their way once more.

"Well, Carl, if they were near Mormon Crossing on the Green River, they never had any idea of going to Denver, as the trader supposed, from the conversation he thought he had held with me."

"No, that is certain."

"And they are going to Salt Lake?"

"It would seem so, chief, but I cannot believe it."

"My brother is a Mormon Danite."

"Yes, he is."

"Then why not go to Salt Lake City?"

"I'll give you my reasons for not thinking so, sir, and you can decide as to whether they are good or not."

"Well, Carl?"

"From what I knew of the situation in the past, as a pretended Danite myself, I think that Captain Branch had incurred, in some way, the displeasure of the Prophet, and had gone off, with a few of the worst element among the elder missionaries, to try and somehow redeem himself."

"He had, by kidnapping Miss Noland, as he did, and afterward killing Elder Mayhew, shown that he intended to cut loose from the band at the Mexican Mission, and yet he would hardly dare return to Salt Lake with a young and beautiful bride for himself, having deserted his fellows."

"The negro, too, unless he shared the fate of the elder, could have him in his power, as you know, and Mormon laws are strict, and their justice sudden and terrible."

"I can well believe that, Carl."

"So, sir, my opinion is that your brother has decided to break from the Mormons, and strike out upon his own responsibility."

"In what way?"

"If he does not go to Salt Lake City, but continues on up the Green River, then he has simply gone to join the band of renegades who have turned outlaws and are known as the Toll-Takers of the Trails."

"Ah! road-agents?"

"Just so, sir."

"Well, I will be surprised at nothing he may do, and your theory may be the correct one, Carl."

"If not, sir, then he has gone on to Salt

Lake, determined to make his peace as best he can with the Prophet."

"And if so, I will still follow him?"

"Yes, sir, but the danger to you will be great indeed."

"I shall go, if I have to do as Branch Bainbridge did."

"How is that, chief?"

"He impersonated me, so I shall impersonate him and go as Captain Branch, the Danite chief," was the determined reply of the ranchero.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRAITOR BROTHER.

BRANCH BAINBRIDGE was one who was born with evil in his heart.

If he had a redeeming trait, only his parents were aware of the fact.

At first all liked him, and he had a personal magnetism that was wonderful.

But soon the cloak of the gentleman would be thrown off, and the man would appear in all the hideousness of his nature.

From early boyhood he had always been hated, despised and feared by all who knew him well, excepting the brother who had ever treated him with marked kindness and affection, to receive only the basest ingratitude in return.

Such was the man, and as he had become a fugitive from justice by his own acts, he had fled, caring nothing where he went or what he became.

And yet this man was the very counterpart of the brother in appearance, who was as true as steel, noble in nature, and all that there was to make up perfect manhood.

Branch Bainbridge had found himself at last in the Western mining company, and fortune favoring him one night in a game of cards, he had won heavily.

With this money he had gone to Salt Lake to play the gentleman.

He had readily become a convert to the Mormon creed, and having saved the Prophet one night from assassination it gave him prestige and power at once.

At his own expense he had fitted out a Mountain Guard and received the rank of a captain in the Danite League.

Then his money had about given out, and he sought more by means which was not to be tolerated by the Mormon leaders, and he was sent on a "missionary tour," which he turned to his own advantage as best he could.

When, down in Texas, he learned of a rich ranchero, the image of himself, he had at once suspected that it was his brother, and, as has been seen, went to his home as a pretended penitent.

He knew his brother's noble nature, and how he would be received.

In his Mormon missionary tour he had taken with him only three "elders," whom he could use as he wished, for his own ends, and they were one and all guilty of deeds which the Mormon leaders would never have tolerated, had they known of some of their acts.

But these worthies, or rather unworthies, hoped to reap a golden harvest for themselves, and take back converts that would be so acceptable that their little misbehavior would be overlooked.

That Branch Bainbridge only used them for his own advancement was shown by his desertion of those in the Mexican Mission the moment that he saw a chance to make a bold stroke for himself.

By a strange coincidence he had been thrown with persons in a northern city, who had known Colonel Noland and his strange history, and that when his daughter was an heiress to a large fortune her father had taken her out of society to hide her in a wilderness, where, no one of his friends seemed to know, nor did they know why, unless it was that he might keep out of the hands of a son-in-law the wealth he had in his keeping for her.

When Mortimer Bainbridge spoke of Colonel Noland and his daughter, of Ranch Retreat, Branch Bainbridge could hardly conceal his joy.

He had found the lost heiress, and he meant to turn it to his own account.

If he could impersonate his brother, play a desperately bold game, and make her his wife, he could achieve a fortune at a stroke, and a beautiful wife as well.

What would he care then for his fellow-missionaries, or that he was a Mormon?

He thought over his plans nightly, and the going of Colorado Carl to San Antonio, as he believed, precipitated it.

He at once rode to the ranch of the cowboy Mormons, put Elder Amos on the track to ambush Colorado Carl, and expected to share the money with him which he supposed he had taken with him to put in bank for the ranchero in San Antonio.

Thanks to Colorado Carl's detective career this game was lost, and along with it the life of Elder Amos.

But though ignorant of this, Branch Bainbridge still held trump cards and played them well, his brother innocently aiding him by the letters he left with him to be sent to Colonel No-

land and his daughter, and by going, at the call of Colorado Carl, to, as the plotter believed, San Antonio.

Two of the Mormon band, spies in the settlement, were at once hunted up by the treacherous brother and dispatched on the trail of Buckskin Sam and Mortimer Bainbridge, to assassinate them.

"Kill them both on the trail, if you can; but if not, dog them to San Antonio, and there be sure and kill the ranchero, and you shall have a golden reward."

Such were his orders to his hirelings, and they departed upon their errand, and rode on to San Antonio, missing the trail of their intended victims, to do the bidding of their master.

But here Branch Bainbridge was at fault, for his brother, as is known already, did not go to San Antonio.

Having, as he believed, put his brother out of the way, or arranged for it, he determined to make Jessie Noland his wife, and he had arranged that the assassinated brother should be considered as himself, and he would become, as it were, Mortimer Bainbridge.

It was a well-plotted, and a devilishly-executed plot as far as much of his plan went, and but for the fact that his brother had not gone to San Antonio, it would have gone through without a miss.

He did not doubt for an instant, when he returned to Overlook Ranch, but that he could convince all that he was Mortimer Bainbridge.

In fact, he would return to Overlook Ranch as Mortimer Bainbridge, and then tell the story of his poor, unfortunate, wicked brother Branch, whom he had always felt certain would come to a bad end.

As a means to help him in his villainous plot, he possessed wonderful skill with his pen, and could forge any signature or writing.

The colonel and Jessie had both seen the ranchero's writing, but were not familiar with it, though the maiden had often read a little poem he had written in her album.

The letters sent by Pete, pretending to be the negro Lucas, certainly appeared to be in the writing of the ranchero.

With his beard shaved close, and his hair cut off, Elder Mayhew certainly appeared the parson in his clerical dress, and knew how to play his part well from having been a Methodist minister before becoming a Mormon convert, and this fact Branch Bainbridge knew, so that there would be no doubt as to the validity of the marriage.

So it was that the traitor brother of Mortimer Bainbridge had stolen from him beautiful Jessie Noland, and had started upon a trail that would lead—where?

CHAPTER XX.

THE DANITE CHIEF'S BRIDE.

BRANCH BAINBRIDGE the traitor brother and Danite chief, had made the peculiarities of his brother Mortimer a study.

By a striking coincidence they were the same height to an eighth of an inch, possessed the same broad shoulders, slender waist and upright carriage.

They weighed the same within the fraction of a pound, and their faces were exactly alike, unless one studied them closely and detected the difference between good and bad stamped upon their features, and a very close student of human nature it would take to do this.

Then their hair was the same hue, and worn alike, while every mannerism of his brother Branch had copied.

The tone of his voice he had also caught, so that when he went to Ranch Retreat to claim Jessie Noland for his wife, he was certainly well equipped for his vile deed.

Not a suspicion had entered the brain of either father or daughter, and when Jessie entered the ambulance and drove away she was a happy girl, only for the parting with her old father.

Just why the father would dwell in a home so remote from civilization, Jessie had never been fully told, and she often sighed for the position in society she had been born to.

But she was a dutiful daughter and had gone without a murmur, while, when she got to the ranch, the new life soon held charms for her and she was contented if not happy.

That she would ever find any one dwelling upon a Texas prairie to fall in love with she had never dreamed, and she would have laughed at the suggestion.

The daring, manly fellows she met she admired and liked, but they could never touch her heart, which so far had never been wounded by Cupid's arrows though often under some pretty hot fires.

Then Mortimer Bainbridge had crossed her path.

He had come upon her like a revelation, the manliest man of them all, the *beau ideal* of all she had ever seen.

He commanded her respect at once, and he won her gratitude by his service, which had saved her father and herself.

She had listened to his modest report of his long ride, and how he had nursed the strength

of his horse, and pushed on to give the warning of danger.

She had noted the fact that he came to risk his life against greatest odds for the sake of strangers.

She had seen him, too, that night, alone in the fight, and her heart bowed down to him in almost adoration.

She compared him with men she had known, who were handsome, splendidly formed and courtly, and they lost by the comparison; Bainbridge, *her hero*, gained.

This mysterious Texan ranchero was superior to all, and he won her heart.

He had traveled much, he had seen the world, and knew much of men and women.

He was well-educated, had read deeply, was accomplished, and, in her mind, had not his peer.

So it was that Jessie Noland, the Pearl of the Prairie, was won by the Mysterious Ranchero.

What a happiness, then, to know that her love was returned, to become his wife, and go with him among the scenes she had known and loved so well!

What mattered it that his wooing was short, that his notice of a wedding-day was sudden and near, for she loved him too dearly not to feel that he was her master.

Was it a wonder, then, that she saw only her lover, her hero, when came this wolf in sheep's clothing to claim her as his wife?

And so they were married by the ex-minister of the Methodist Church, and the whilom Mormon elder.

Her trunk was placed in the ambulance, and she drove away by the side of a superb-looking demon in human shape.

They were to go, he said, by the safest trail, up to Santa Fé, thence on to catch the Overland stage line, and Eastward by its coaches to civilization.

Such was the course he laid out, and good "Parson Mayhew" and "Lucas" would accompany them.

The villain told his young and unsuspecting bride that she would have to undergo hardships on the long journey, but that he had brought a small tent along in the ambulance, with all to make her comfortable, and that "Lucas" was an excellent cook, and she should not want for the best of game which his rifle could procure by the way.

He laughingly told her that she might have to leave her trunk at Santa Fé, as the trail they would take from there would not be by the stage route, and that her "trousseau" would have to be put on a pack-saddle, and she perhaps play the part of a boy.

"It will be safer, Jessie, far safer for you to do so; but I will not ask it of you if it can be avoided in any way," he added.

"I am willing, Mortimer, if it is necessary, to dress as a boy; but will I have to cut my hair off?" and she lightly touched her mass of red-gold hair.

"No, indeed, not for the world, my darling," was the reply.

"This will certainly be a romantic wedding tour, Mortimer—enough so to satisfy the craving of the most sentimental of school-girls," said Jessie, with a laugh, and at heart she really enjoyed the danger and adventure of the trip, for with Mortimer Bainbridge, her hero, with her, what was there for her to fear which he could not overcome? she fondly asked herself.

The parson, too, seemed to be a most genial gentleman, and told her amusing stories, while "Lucas" was most polite and was attentive to her in every way.

The trail was not a rough one, the mules traveled well, the scenery was fine, and poor Jessie entered upon her new life, still unclouded to her, with a heart full of joy.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SECOND VICTIM.

TAKEN altogether, Elder Mayhew was not by any means the worst of men.

He had his faults, and while a missionary of his church among the Indians he had met many Mormons, became interested in their faith, and thus became a convert.

A man of iron frame and intelligence, with a voice that was like a trumpet and a good speaker, withal genial and good-hearted, he had made his way up to a position as "Missionary Elder" among the people whom he had adopted as his own.

When he agreed to go with Branch Bainbridge, he had expected that the maiden was a convert, and was being wedded by proxy for the prophet.

But when too late to retreat from the position he discovered the truth, and so made the best of it.

He saw that Branch Bainbridge was playing some deep and desperate game, and he could only surmise that it was all for himself, and not for the prophet or the good of the Mormon creed.

So he decided to speak to the chief and warn him.

This he did at their first camp, for he called Branch Bainbridge aside and said:

"Chief, I don't wish to interfere, but are you going to take this lady to Salt Lake?"

"I have not decided."

"You remember you are under a cloud with the prophet and the rulers, and this trip to Texas was expected to redeem you."

"Well?"

"If you go back to report the Elder Amos dead and that you have deserted the Mexican mission, while you carry back the most beautiful of brides, there will surely be trouble."

"I will face the trouble."

"But I will have no excuse for returning and deserting my comrades."

"You will go by my orders."

"You are aware that your orders reach me only under certain circumstances, Captain Branch."

"Well, I have married the girl, and she is an heiress."

"Stick to me, and you shall not regret it; but fail me and you shall."

"This is a threat?"

"Take it as you please."

"Suppose I inform the lady of the true situation?"

"Did you make the attempt I would kill you on the spot."

"I think you know me, Mayhew, and that I make no idle threats."

This awed the elder, and he was silent.

Then Captain Branch said:

"Now see here: I have married the girl, and she will be worth a very large fortune, independent of her being a very beautiful and lovable woman."

"I have money, plenty of it, and in addition her father placed in my hands drafts on New York for five thousand more, as a present for his daughter, payable to her."

"You are no more a Mormon Danite than am I, when your interests are concerned, and I tell you to stand by me and I will make you well off."

"Attempt double dealing and treachery, and I will kill you without one atom of remorse."

"What will you do, Elder Mayhew?"

"Stand by you, of course, for I have no desire to die, chief, and I do love money."

"You are wise now, and I advise you to grow in wisdom."

Mayhew was not a coward by any means; but he was awed by the Danite chief, and he held his peace, where his duty demanded that he should have acted promptly and for the good of the wronged girl.

But he had made a mistake in speaking at all to the Danite, for it put him upon his guard and he at once decided to get rid of the man.

To do this was no easy matter and not bring the suspicion of the negro Pete upon him.

But one afternoon he asked the elder to drop back on the trail for an hour and see if they were not pursued.

He told Mayhew that they would camp at a certain time, a few miles on ahead and he could overtake them there.

The point where he left him was upon a mountain ridge commanding a view of their trail across a level plain as far as the eye could reach.

"I do not know why I should be suspicious, elder, but I have a presentiment that we are pursued."

"Take my glass and remain here until near sunset, and then hasten on, for I will camp not five miles away."

"If you see any one on the trail, then show your noted powers as a runner and overtake us, and we can dodge them in the night without doubt."

"You can see back a dozen miles with this glass, and if there are pursuers it will give us three hours' start and night ahead of us, for they can hardly come further than this place before sunset."

The elder took the glass and stopped, and soon after, not three miles ahead, the Danite went into camp.

Soon he began to show professed anxiety about the lagging-back of the elder, and told Jessie he would return and look for him, as he was subject to vertigo and might have fallen on the trail.

Back he went and waited until the elder was seen coming along the trail at a trot.

"I was just coming back to look you up, elder, and say that we would push on through the night."

"You didn't see any pursuers, did you?"

"No, chief," and the two walked side by side for awhile.

"Is that not a deer?" and the Danite pointed to a thicket.

The two, rifles in hand, crept off from the trail, and when at some little distance away, the elder slightly in advance, the right arm of the Danite fell with terrific force, a knife in his hand, and the blade was buried to the hilt in the back of the unsuspecting man.

A groan, a cry, a few muttered prayers, and the poor parson's life had ended.

The assassin coolly cleaned his knife, hid the red stains as well as he could and then bore the body to the trail, where he placed it upon a mossy bank.

Hastening to camp, he hastily told Jessie and the negro that his fears were realized, that the unfortunate elder had fallen dead on the trail.

Back to the spot they went, Pete carrying the spade and pick which had been brought along, and while the negro dug the grave the Danite infolded the form in his blanket, thus hiding his red work.

And then the cruel Danite, to curry favor with the sorrowing Jessie, repeated the burial service over the dead, and which he knew by heart.

It was dark when they returned to the camp, and that night a shadow seemed to have fallen upon the heart of the Danite's bride, for she could not shake off the gloom that had seized upon her.

CHAPTER XXII.

STARTLING TIDINGS FOR THE DANITE.

THE journey was resumed at dawn, on the day following the death of Elder Mayhew; but a gloom seemed to have settled upon both Jessie and Pete, which the Danite could not dispel.

He made himself more entertaining than ever, told witty stories, and yet could not drive away the shadow.

He grew uneasy, for did Jessie suspect him?

Had the elder already hinted to her something of the truth of her awful situation, wedded to a Danite?

Or did Pete suspect him?

He had discovered that the negro had taken his rifle and gone out soon after he did, for game, he said.

But he had failed to find any, and had just returned to camp before he did.

Was this the case, that Pete had discovered what had really happened to the elder?

The negro did seem to be morose and very quiet, or at least the Danite thought so.

But Branch Bainbridge was not a man readily intimidated, and so he held on his way until his own light-hearted manner seemed to gradually dispel the gloom.

He knew that there dwelt in Santa Fé a man who was a Mormon, and to his home he went upon his arrival there.

The man was in good circumstances, had a good home, and bade the Danite welcome, and the two held a long conversation together.

The next day Captain Branch looked about for good saddle-horses, knowing that it would be the safest way to continue his journey.

He determined to dispose of his ambulance and mules, secure saddle and pack horses, and thus go on.

He also wanted a competent guide, and began to look about for one, and discovered two men who would go together, but neither would go and return alone, as they said the risks were too great.

They also suggested that the Danite, who represented himself as an army officer with his wife and servant, urge the lady to dress in male attire.

This Jessie at last yielded to, after they were again on the road, and the party, now increased to five, with the addition of the two guides, started for Denver, nominally, though Branch Bainbridge had no intention of going there.

He had already decided upon his course, which was to strike the Overland stage-trail, dismiss his guides, get rid of Pete, the last living witness, as he believed, to prove that he was not Mortimer Bainbridge, and going East after a stay there of some time, to return to Texas, take his brother's property, for he looked upon him as surely dead, and then of course get possession of his wife's wealth all in good time.

To him the future opened well, for he was devoid of remorse or conscience.

With his brother dead, Mayhew in his grave, and Pete out of the way, there would be no one to prove that he was not Mortimer Bainbridge, and he argued that with his brother, Branch, the Danite, he of course had nothing to do.

Stopping one night at a ranch on the trail, he was startled to find there Elder Sterling, of the Mexican Mission.

Fortunately for him then and there the recognition took place in the stable-yard, and not before any one.

"In the name of Nauvoo, Sterling, what are you doing here?" he cried.

As he did so he gave the Danite signs and countersign, and regretted doing so the moment after, for he had forgotten that he was to play Mortimer Bainbridge clear through.

"I am obeying your orders, chief," was the answer.

"My orders? Man, are you mad?"

"No."

"What do you mean?"

"Captain Branch, are you in earnest asking me such a question?"

"I certainly am."

"You ask me what I am doing here?"

"I do."

"And I tell you I am obeying your orders."

"I never gave you an order to come here."

"Not to this spot, no, but to return to Salt Lake."

"I did not."

"You did."

"When?"

"Six days ago."

"Where?"

"In Mexico."

"In Mexico?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"At the Mormon Mission."

"The hacienda of Don Miranda?"

"Yes."

"Elder Sterling."

"Sir?"

"I have not been in Mexico for six months."

"Captain Branch."

"Sir?"

"I cannot understand what your conduct means."

"It means, sir, just what I say, that I have not been in Mexico for months, that I have seen you but twice in the time since I left there to go to my brother's ranch in Texas, and then met you at our rendezvous on Texan soil."

"I gave you no such orders."

"Then it was your ghost."

"My ghost?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you deny that you came to the Miranda Hacienda one night a week ago with Bugler Charlie?"

"With Bugler Charlie?" cried the Danite with amazement.

"Yes, you came there, or your ghost did, with Bugler Charlie, and told us that the Mexican Lancers and Texan Rangers were cognizant of our mission, and who we had there, and for what purpose."

"You said that Buckskin Sam, the noted Texan Ranger scout, was guiding the Rangers thither to pounce upon us; that Elder Ames had been killed and his papers gave all away, and we must at once fly for our lives, going singly and with all speed back to Utah, where you would soon join us."

"You said that the Don must get rid of these converts, sending them away at once to await at their homes until we could in safety take them to Salt Lake, and that they could say that they had been kidnapped by Mexican raiders and held for ransom until rescued."

"Now here I find you this far on your way to Utah, and along with you Pete, the black pard of Elders Mayhew and Amos, and you tell me that you gave us no such orders."

The Danite had listened in breathless silence to this story of Elder Sterling.

It began to dawn upon him slowly.

Buckskin Sam had brought a letter to his brother, and Colorado Carl, known to the Mormons as Bugler Charlie, had been the one who had gone to Mexico presumably with him, Branch Bainbridge.

Colorado Carl was a Mormon, knew the signs and all, and though suspicion had often fallen upon him of playing a double game, he had never been caught in an act of disloyalty.

Then, too, the money which Mortimer Bainbridge had been supposed to give to Colorado Carl to bank in San Antonio had been found by him, Branch Bainbridge.

This would indicate that he had not intended going to San Antonio.

At last he saw all, and knew that his brother was also playing a bold game, for he had gone to Mexico, taught by Colorado Carl the signs of the Danites, and impersonating him, Branch, had dispersed the elders, rescued the converts, and was even then upon his trail.

He knew that, aroused against him as he now was, Mortimer Bainbridge would be as merciless as a viper.

What was to be done he did not know.

If he returned to Salt Lake the prophet would hold him liable for his misdeeds, and he dared not go East, for with his brother alive he could not play Mortimer Bainbridge successfully.

He had betrayed himself to Elder Sterling, and he must now get out of the scrape.

"Elder," he said, "I had a motive for saying what I did to you, for there is a traitor among our number, and now I am convinced that you are not the man."

"Join my party, and we will go on together, and soon I can fully explain the situation."

The next day Elder Sterling added one more to the Danite's party.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DANITE AT BAY.

ELDER STERLING was not a man readily deceived.

There was something that struck him as strange in the conduct of the Danite chief, and he was astounded to see in his company a boy, as he believed at first, soon turn out to be a woman.

Then, too, he heard her call the Danite Mortimer, and Elder Sterling knew that his brother, a Texan ranchero, was named Mortimer.

Jessie had not sacrificed her hair at first, but when it broke loose from its fastenings and fell like a veil around her, betraying her sex to the elder, her husband had at once caused her to sacrifice it.

It cost her bitter tears, but she yielded, and

Pete, who had been a barber in early life, cut it to the requisite length for her.

Then Elder Sterling knew Pete as Pete, not as Lucas, which both the Danite and Jessie called him.

The coils thus began to draw about the Danite, and Elder Sterling questioned Pete as they rode along together.

He showed no suspicion of the Danite chief, but drew out that Branch Bainbridge had not been to Mexico, to his, Pete's, knowledge, of late, that Elder Amos had disappeared mysteriously, and Elder Mayhew had died on the way of a fit.

That he had performed the ceremony of marriage which had made Jessie the Danite's wife, and more, that she was the daughter of a wealthy ranchero in Texas.

The elder became now convinced that something was wrong, and that the Danite intended to give the Mormons the slip.

So, a real Mormon at heart, he was determined that, if the Danite was going to prove traitor, he should suffer for it.

Such was the situation the second night after the elder joined the party.

The guides reported Indian signs, so that the night's encampment was sought in a secluded place and a watch was kept.

It was lucky for them that it was so, as a band of two-score red skins made a rush upon their camp, but, having been discovered beforehand, they were met by a telling and rapid fire which quickly checked their advance and made them seek cover.

Jessie had been under fire before, when their train had been attacked at the time her father moved into Texas, and she was perfectly cool and loaded the weapons rapidly.

The five men, for Pete was a hero in a fight, stood their ground and awaited a renewal of the charge.

Again it came; the red-skins, having dismounted, crept near in the darkness and rushed to the attack.

The five rifles flashed forth rapidly, then the revolvers, and the Indians again drew off under the withering storm of lead.

Thus the hours passed away until, just before dawn, the Indians made a third rush to break into the temporary little fort.

But their numbers had been weakened, and the defenders seemed just as strong and as deadly in their aim, so that a third time they fell back.

"Mr. Sterling is dead!"

It was Jessie who spoke, and she bent over the form of the Mormon.

He had stood near the Danite during the fight, and, strange to say, had been shot in the back of the head.

"I heard no shootin'-irons among them reds," said one of the guides.

"Waal, there were one, or how did he git shot?" his comrade said.

The elder was struck directly in the back of his head, and the Danite coolly said:

"He turned and spoke to me, and then looked around to see if any of us were hurt, and he must have received the shot then."

"Yas, thet's so," said one of the guides.

Dawn was at hand now, and with one of their number dead and one of their guides slightly wounded, they began to dread the result, especially if the Indians received reinforcements, or by daylight could see how to pick off the defenders with bows and arrows while others charged them.

The form of the dead elder Jessie covered with a blanket, and then bound up the wound of the guide just as day broke well, and another yell of the red-skins showed that they were coming in another rush.

But answering yells were heard down the valley, and a loud voice giving orders, and the red-skins broke in dismay, rushed for their ponies and fled, for they believed the cavalry upon them.

Hardly had they disappeared when three horsemen dashed into sight.

One was in advance and rode a superb horse, while he wore the garb of a Mexican.

He had his rifle in his hand and came on in an utterly fearless manner.

His companions were also well mounted, and looked just what they were, Mexicans of the lower class.

They were armed with rifles, which they held ready for use as they dashed up to the rescue.

"By the prophet! but it is El Monte!" cried the Danite excitedly.

"Who is El Monte, Mortimer?" asked Jessie, as she gazed upon the leader of their rescuers.

The Danite made no reply, but sprung from the barrier and advanced toward the three men.

At sight of him the Mexican leader drew rein, but the Danite quickly made several signs and advancing rapidly held out his hand, which the other grasped, while he said in a surprised tone:

"It is you, then, Captain Branch?"

"Yes, and you have saved us from being massacred by red-skins, so the past is forgiven, El Monte."

"I thank you for that, chief; but I heard the firing from our camp and dashed up to the rescue, little dreaming I would meet you."

"Well, I can only repeat that the past is fully pardoned, El Monte, and I wish you to only appear as an old friend of mine, for those with me are not Mormons."

"I will explain at another time, but show no surprise, and I will introduce you as a Mexican army officer."

"Do as you deem best, chief, for I will acquiesce," was the reply.

"And your men?"

"Are two cut-throat Mexicans I allied to my fortunes not wishing to take the long trail from Mexico to Utah alone?"

"Then you have come from Mexico?"

"Yes, I went there to visit my father, Don Henrico Miranda."

"Then Don Henrico Miranda is your father—you are not El Monte, but Monte Miranda."

"I know you now, and all about you."

CHAPTER XXIV.

EL MONTE, THE MEXICAN.

NOT wishing to attract attention to a prolonged conversation—for, guilty always, Branch Bainbridge was suspicious always—the Danite led the Mexicans into the little camp which had been so well defended.

A few Indian ponies and half a dozen dead braves were evidence of the true aim of the defenders of the camp, which, fortunately for them, was a natural fort.

There was a rocky barrier on the little hill, while a few trees hastily felled had made a strong breastwork, and a natural hollow had protected the horses from the arrows of the Indians.

The reader met Monte Miranda on his visit to his father at his hacienda in Mexico, so no description of him is necessary further than to say that now he was dressed as a *caballero* of his country.

His manners were courtly, and certainly he was one to attract a woman's eye admiringly.

His companions were of the lower order, and if not what he had called them, cut-throats, they belied their looks.

In his pleasant way, which he had assumed since playing the happy bridegroom and his brother's character, Branch Bainbridge presented the Mexican as an old-time friend, and an officer of the Lanceros of Mexico.

The two Mexicans could not speak a word of English, so could therefore not contradict or affirm anything, and when alluded to as soldiers, took it as stolidly as though they were being accused of murder.

The guide, who had not been wounded, at once said he would go on a scout to see if the red-skins were really gone, while Pete set to work to prepare breakfast, and the two Mexicans were ordered by El Monte to dig a grave for the dead elder.

They set to work like men who had had plenty of that kind of work to do before, and the elder was laid in his last resting-place, the Danite, as before, with Elder Mayhew, reading the burial service over him.

By the time this was done Pete had breakfast ready, and the scout came in and reported the Indians miles away and in rapid flight, as though pursued.

The Danite's thoughts were busy the while, and he knew of no better chance to get rid of the guides than then.

One had been wounded, and they were both honest men, who, if they suspected his crime toward Jessie, would have become her defenders to the end.

So the Danite said as they were all at breakfast:

"I hope, Captain Miranda, that you are going my way, for I can hardly ask our good friends here to continue on, as one of them is wounded."

Monte Miranda read the look of the Danite, and said:

"I am traveling for pleasure, on my way to Fort M—to visit officers of the fifth cavalry whom I met last year, and I will be glad to continue on with you, for mutual protection, señor, not to speak of the pleasure of your company."

Thus the matter was settled, and the Danite was glad to get rid of the guides, paying them for their full time and causing it to appear as though his humanity alone prompted his sending them back.

When, a couple of hours after, they took their departure, the Danite and Monte accompanied them for a short distance, saying that they would also make a circuit of the camp to see that the Indians had wholly disappeared.

They left the guides a mile from camp, and then the Danite dismounted, sat down upon a bank, and said quietly:

"Monte, let us understand each other fully."

"Yes, Captain Branch."

"Two years ago you were ordered to my command as a Danite officer of the Mountain Guards?"

"I remember, sir."

"You were a new convert to Mormonism, as I understood it, and gave your name as Henrico El Monte."

"True."

"Well, our treasure-box disappeared one

night in a most mysterious manner, and for more reasons than one you were suspected."

"I recall the fact, Captain Branch."

"Suspicion was so strong against you that I sent you under guard of two men to the prophet."

"But I did not get there?"

"No, for neither you nor the men were ever heard of afterwards, until I saw you to-day."

"And if I had known that it was you that the red-skins had corraled I would not have been heard of again, at least by Mormons; but you forgave me for rescuing you, chief?"

"Yes; but what became of those men?"

"I happened to have some money about me, which when searched was not found, and taking the measure of my two men I offered them what I deemed their price."

"Well?"

"They accepted, and set me free, and I went East with considerable alacrity."

"You knew that your death would be the forfeit if the prophet heard the accusation against you?"

"Well, yes, I knew that the prophet had too many officers to ruin me should I suddenly be called away."

"And the two men?"

"Well, they took my advice."

"Which was?"

"To join the band of outlaws known as the Toll-Takers of the Overland."

"Ah, yes, and I suppose they did; but you are going now dangerously near Mormonland for a man who has been sentenced to death as you have?"

"Well, the risk is great, I admit, but if I meet with success it will be worth taking big chances."

"May I ask if your purpose is to kidnap the prophet and hold him for ransom?"

"My heavens! what a scheme that would be, and I'll go into it with you; chief, if that is what you are here for."

The Danite's face flushed.

He had not thought of it before, and the idea had only flashed into his head as he talked to Monte.

He knew the Mexican to be as cunning and bold as he was daring, and that perhaps such was his intention in going again to the borders of Mormonland, as he was a renegade Danite.

"Such was not my intention, Monte."

"Well, I didn't know, and the suggestion is a good one."

"Why, do you suspect that I am a renegade Danite because you are one?"

"Well, as I said, I went to visit my old father, Don Henrico Miranda, in Mexico, and he is a Mormon convert, though he did not suspect me of being a renegade, when I showed him that I was a Mormon also."

"He did not know that, as a Danite, I was known as Henrico El Monte."

"Of course we talked over matters and I found out that his hacienda had been the Mission for the converts, and that Captain Branch had just been there and dispersed all in great alarm."

"I discovered that you had some reason for sending the elders away, for there was not the slightest cause for alarm."

"Now I find you here with a young and beautiful girl, on the trail of the Overland, and I take the idea that you, too, are a renegade," and the Mexican laughed in a way that grated harshly upon the ears of Branch Bainbridge.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE COMPACT.

THE Danite felt that he had one to deal with, who, like himself, was a dangerous man.

To attempt bravo with the Mexican he knew would be useless.

Somehow he had an idea, from what Monte had said, that he had come back into that dangerous region for a purpose that would pan out well.

So he decided to go cautiously, and see just what hand the Mexican held before showing his own cards.

"Why do you think I am a renegade, Monte?" he asked quietly.

"My father told me that you were under a cloud with the prophet, and had been sent South on a missionary tour."

"You ordered the elders back who went with you, and sent the converts to their homes, and for no reason whatever, as the Rangers and Lanceros did not suspect the hacienda of being a Mormon Mission."

"Now I find you here, with a beautiful woman—"

"Who said that there was a woman with me?"

"I am not blind, chief, and the pretended boy whom you introduced as Master Noland I know to be a woman, and she is a beautiful woman, too."

"Granted that it is a woman, what then?"

"That is proof beyond doubt that you have run off with her and will not dare face the prophet."

"Granted this also?"

"Well, you are then what I am."

"A renegade?"

"Yes."

"Well, let us grant this also, that I am a renegade."

"For the sake of argument?" and the Mexican smiled.

"Well, call it so."

"Then you dare not enter Utah, unless as I do, to gain some point that will be of great service to you."

"Then that is why you have come?"

"It is."

"Be frank with me, Monte, and tell me why you are here."

"Confidence begets confidence, chief."

"You wish me to tell you what my plans are?"

"Yes."

"Suppose that I tell you that I am a renegade?"

"Well?"

"Suppose I add that I am a fugitive now?"

"I can readily believe it."

"That I did intend to go East, but my plans were altered from what Elder Sterling told me?"

"Well?"

"And that I am now driven to the wall, seeking only a place of refuge?"

"Chief?"

"Yes."

"I am going to take your suppositions as the actual facts of the case."

"Do so."

"Now there is a place of refuge for you."

"Where?"

"And for me, too."

"Where is it?"

"Just where I am going."

"You are going?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"After I have accomplished a certain purpose."

"And that is—"

"You recall that you accused me of taking the treasure-box of the Danite League?"

"I did, and I have always thought that you did so."

"But you never found the box?"

"Never!"

"Well, I hid it so securely that it was impossible for you to do so."

"You admit taking it, then?"

"I do."

"You had confederates?"

"Not one."

"It was impossible without one."

"How so?"

"The guards were around my tent."

"All right; I got the box, all the same."

"How did you do it?"

"As you seem interested, I will tell you."

"I should like to know."

"Well, chief, you remember it rained that night?"

"I recall that it did."

"You had a supper for the officers in your tent."

"Yes."

"Well, I pushed the box there against the back of the tent, and threw a *serape* upon it."

"Later I slipped to the rear of the tent, and cutting a gash in the canvas drew the box out and put the end of a lariat around it."

"Then I slipped to a tree thirty feet distant, carrying the box."

"Climbing the tree, I drew the box up after me and hid it in a crotch where the foliage completely concealed it."

"You are a clever rascal, Monte."

"Thanks, chief."

"We could never find trace of the box, and as the sentinel recognized you, passing to the rear of my tent, we all deemed you guilty of the robbery."

"As I was."

"And you went afterward, when we changed the camp, and got the box?"

"The box was of no use to me."

"Well, the contents?"

"Now for your confession, chief."

"I'll be as frank with you as you have been with me."

"I am a fugitive, a renegade, if you wish, and though a few days ago all looked most promising to me, now all is blackness, and I am going to cast my lot with the outlaws."

"The Overland band known as the Toll-Takers of the Trails?"

"The same."

"Do you know any of them?"

"I know their chief."

"He is called Major Mephisto?"

"Yes."

"He is said to be a renegade Danite."

"He is, and one who owes his life to you."

"A number of them are renegade Danites, several are deserters from the army, and others are fugitives from justice."

"Well, so are we."

"True; but the lady?"

"I will keep the true situation from her as long as I can, and her love for me is such that she will not desert me."

"You have beautiful faith, chief; but let me offer a suggestion?"

"Well?"
 "I have not yet returned for that treasure."
 "You said you had?"
 "No, I evaded your question by saying I did not care for the box."
 "And it is there?"
 "Yes, and I am going for the treasure now."
 "And then?"
 "I am going to also join the Toll-Takers."
 "Can this be true?"
 "It is."
 "But why?"
 "Well, I have a big play to make, and the Toll-Takers can help me."
 "I was going to get the treasure, which amounts to some eight thousand in gold, I believe, and offer Major Mephisto a handsome sum for the rank of second in command, and then join with my two cut-throats."
 "Now, we'll go together, and you shall hold second rank, I third, and I'll put up the money."
 "Then we can serve each other."
 "Here's my hand on it, Monte."
 And the compact of villainy was thus made.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT HIS MERCY.

JESSIE found the Mexican officer, as she believed him, a very entertaining person, but she stood in awe of his cut-throat-looking soldiers, and was glad when her husband and "Captain" Monte returned to camp.

It was decided to move on soon after, and the Danite chief was now thrown upon his own resources as guide.

But he was at no loss on this account, for he was a perfect frontiersman.

He rode on ahead and alone, while Monte accompanied Jessie, Pete followed with the pack-horses close behind, and the two Mexicans brought up the rear a hundred yards back.

Pete did not like the two Mexicans, and had already said to Jessie:

"Missy, ef dem two sojers am honest folks whar dey come from, I'd jist like to take a quick peep at some o' de wicked ones."

"They are a hard-looking pair, I admit, Lucas," was the answer.

"Waal, mebbe dey is honest, missy, but I is jist going ter ask yer ter take keer o' my bag o' money fer me while dey is round, for it's all I've got, and dey moutn't be walkin' in dere sleep some night in camp."

Jessie laughed and took the money, which she discovered was a considerable sum.

From the contents of the bag, which she stowed away in her own sachel, that hung at her saddlehorn, she wondered how "Lucas" had come into possession of such a treasure, and so much.

There were gold and silver watches, a few chains, rings, breast-pins, a pair of earrings, bracelets and money, from gold and silver of all denominations to a roll of bills.

"Were you ever in the jewelry business, Lucas?"

If Pete had not been painted as a red-skin, Jessie would have seen him turn pale at the question.

"No, missy, dem things was found in a bag on ther pararer one day, 'ceptin' de money, which I earned like a honest nigger," was the ready lie, and below his breath he added:

"Lord fergive me fer a liar!"

If Jessie doubted the explanation given she did not say so, and having put the things into her sachel with her own valuables, she mounted her horse and found that Monte was to be her immediate escort.

The Mexican Mormon made himself most agreeable.

His foreign accent was so slight as to be hardly noticed, he talked well, and seemed determined to make an impression.

But Jessie's mental decision was, when they camped that night, that there was something about the man she did not like.

So they continued on their way without further adventure, until they neared the dangerous land where they were likely to run upon a band of Danite patrols.

Still the unsuspecting Jessie held faith in her husband, and she was told how they had to make a wide circuit from their course to avoid bands of Indians.

She believed them, and only hoped that they would reach the Overland trail in safety, for she was becoming very tired of her arduous, perilous life.

Then, too, she was beginning to feel that there was something wanting in her husband.

He did not seem to her all that she could wish, or that she had thought that he would be.

One day she caught herself regretting that she had married so hastily, and without knowing the man better.

Yet he had done nothing to cause this, he had been all kindness, all gentleness to her, and only the something in her heart was discovering the cheat, dividing the chaff from the wheat in his nature.

One night they camped in a canyon, and she overheard her husband say:

"This looks natural, and the old camp is yonder on the ridge, not half a mile away."

"Have you been here before, Mortimer?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, once, when we left the trail to escape from some Mormon guards, and were in hiding for a few days," he returned with no show of embarrassment.

But she also caught the words of Monte soon after:

"We will go after supper, when we can pretend to be on a scout."

She saw no reason for pretending anything, and so said:

"What would you pretend, Captain Monte?"

The Mexican was nonplused, but the chief came to his aid with:

"Sh, Jessie, for don't let those Mexicans hear you, for we have a plan to make them keep awake on guard, as they always go to sleep."

"So we are going to pretend there are redskins about, and go off scouting after supper, you see?"

"But I thought they did not understand a word of English, so why lower your voices?"

"They did tell their captain they did not, but I overheard them talking English to Pete."

"Pete?"

"How stupid I am, Lucas, I mean."

For some reason Jessie was suspicious.

Not of a plot against herself, but that there was something being kept from her, some danger, perhaps, with which they were threatened.

The two Danites, when supper was over, left the camp, as they had said they would, and placed the Mexicans upon guard, at the same time telling them to keep a bright lookout for Indians.

Before going, the chief had said to Pete:

"Look here, Lucas, you are getting lazy, and I wish you to have your dishes all washed up and beds spread by the time we return."

"Yes, boss, I'll do it," was the reply.

And hardly had the two departed before he sought Miss Jessie and said:

"Missy, I wants yer ter do me a favor."

"Well, Lucas?"

"I done drop one o' the boss's pistols back on the trail a mile, and I recommembers jist whar it is, and I doesn't want him ter git mad with me, so will you jist be so good, missy, as ter clean up ther dishes fer me while I runs arter it, and I won't fergit yer fer it, I promises yer."

"Yes, Lucas, I'll do it for you, with pleasure, and get the camp to rights for the night; but you had better get back before my husband returns, for I know he does not like you to leave camp."

"Yes, missy, I'll be back soon."

And Pete darted away out of the camp.

In the mean time the two Danites had gone down the camp some distance to where the trail led up on the ridge.

This they followed through thick timber for half a mile, and halted at an open space before the ridge where there were signs of a camp having been located.

Trees were felled in a circle, forming a kind of a barrier, and half-burnt logs were here and there, where camp-fires had long since burned out.

"Here stood my tent," said the Danite chief, halting at a spot which was in the center of the camp.

"Yes," muttered the Mexican, as he unwrapped a bundle, displaying two "spurs," such as are worn by telegraph linemen in ascending poles to repair wires.

These he buckled onto his legs, and with a lariat swung over his shoulder, he laid aside his belt of arms and began to slowly ascend a tree with heavy branches and thick foliage growing some forty feet from the ground.

The Danite chief watched him with a strange look upon his face, and as he reached a point some twenty feet from the ground, drew a revolver from his belt and leveled it at the unsuspecting man.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STOLEN TREASURE.

MONTE, the Mexican, little suspected the danger he was in, as he slowly ascended the tree.

For an instant the Danite chief held him covered with his revolver, his finger upon the trigger.

But suddenly he lowered it, and quickly replaced the weapon, while he said:

"No, let him do the work, and then will be my time."

Monte went on up to the branches, and then called down:

"It is here, chief, safe and sound."

"Yes, no one but a bird would have ever found it there."

"Lower away!"

The box had been well concealed, so that it was not visible to the chief from where he stood.

Tying one end of the lariat around the box, which was stoutly built and iron-bound, the Mexican lowered it slowly to the ground, where the Danite chief caught it.

Then the Mexican turned to descend, and once more the revolver was drawn and leveled.

But again it was lowered, for the chief muttered:

"I must not make any mistake by killing him now, for explanations might be difficult."

"No, another time will suit me better, for he is wholly at my mercy when I want his life."

Then the Mexican came down and took off his climbing spurs.

Then from a pocket he took a bunch of skeleton keys.

"You came provided, I see."

"Yes, chief, this would be no easy box to open in a hurry, and it could not be run off with easily, so I wished to open it without trouble," and the Mexican bent over, and after a few trials fitted a skeleton-key that unlocked it.

The lid was opened, revealing a number of papers, which were placed to one side, in the eager haste to get the valuables.

The treasure was all there, silver, gold, paper money and a quantity of jewelry, which looked very much as though the band whose paymaster's box it was, had been given to highway robbery.

"This is your box, Captain Branch, in one sense of the word, for you were the chief of the Danite Guard; but I robbed the guard, and so it is mine also."

"Had I not done so, this treasure would not be now in our possession, and under the circumstances, I will divide even with you."

"It is generous of you, Monte, to say the least," and whether the chief spoke with a sneer or not the Mexican did not detect.

They then began to count the money, and divide it and the valuables, and night came on as they finished their task.

Then they stowed away their treasure, and moved off on their return to the camp.

Pete had arrived just before them and reported to Jessie that he had found the pistol.

Then, with remarkable alacrity for him, he set to work arranging the camp, and when the Danite chief glanced about him he said:

"You have done well, Pete."

Jessie smiled, for she had done two-thirds of the work.

"Yes, boss, I allus works hard when yer tells me ter," said Pete, grinning.

A cheerful fire was made before the Danite's tent, and as soon as he had stowed away in some secure place among his baggage what his pockets contained, Branch Bainbridge invited Monte to join them at their camp-fire.

The next morning early they continued on their way, and their course now lay directly for the Uintah Mountains where the Toll-Takers of the Trails were said to have their retreat.

It was the second night after obtaining the treasure, that, as they sat around the camp-fire, the Danite chief suddenly sprang to his feet and called to the Mexican to follow him, as he strode rapidly away beyond ear-shot of Jessie and the others in camp.

The Mexican was surprised at this new excitement in the Danite chief, and hastily followed beyond the arc of light of the camp-fires.

"My God, Monte, we left those papers!"

"What papers, chief?"

"Those we found in the box."

"By the prophet, I forgot all about them."

"Are they valuable?"

"More than you can know, Monte, for they contain a number of Mormon secrets, and would do much harm in the hands of any Gentile, if found by one."

"I cannot return now, but when we reach Major Mephisto's camp, I shall go after them, or you must," and the Danite chief's face was more troubled than Monte had ever before seen it.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN DIRE SUSPENSE.

It was the last camp before they would reach the haunts of the road-agent band known as the Toll-Takers, whose chief, under the name of "Major Mephisto," had proven a terror to border settlements and the Overland stage-coach travelers.

The next day before noon the party would enter that *terra incognita* to all except outlaws, where Major Mephisto and his law-breakers had their haunt.

Branch Bainbridge had grown a trifle nervous the past few days.

His selfish nature had never allowed him to love any one other than himself, until he had met this beautiful young girl who had loved him so devotedly, and at whose mercy she was in all her helplessness.

She had touched what little heart he had, stirred into a flame what little human nature he had in his composition, and he shrunk from having to confess to her how black he was in his evil life.

He had plotted boldly, planned desperately, and executed with daring, and yet he had been overreached.

Had his brother been killed by the assassin he had hired to do the work, it might be that Branch Bainbridge, with the Overlook Ranch cattle and Mortimer Bainbridge's bank-account, not to speak of the fortune he expected from Jessie, might have, under her influence, become a different man.

But the fates had willed against him, and his

brother was alive, so he could not play Mortimer Bainbridge while that person lived.

In his alarm he had been forced to fly to the protection of outlaws, for, as a renegade Danite, he would be doomed to death if he fell into the hands of the Mormons.

As he now had but one thing to do, he must confess to Jessie just what that was.

He would not make himself as black as he really was, and he would still pose before her as Mortimer Bainbridge.

But he must let her believe that, since leaving the ranch, he had been discovered to be guilty of killing a man, for which he would be hanged, if taken.

Under such circumstances he would be forced to seek to save his life by hiding among the outlaws of the mountains.

This confession would be bad enough, he knew, but it would be the best explanation he could make under the circumstances, and he trusted to the love borne him by poor Jessie, that she would still cling to him, be he what he might.

If she wished to leave him, why, then, she should not do so, that was all.

Then, too, he arranged in his own mind that his brother should die.

Once free of Mortimer Bainbridge, and he could play that character successfully, and as such return to the ranch, and he did not doubt but that then he would be able to explain to Jessie his having allied himself to outlaws, making his brother the scapegoat in every case.

Such were the reasons for Branch Bainbridge feeling nervous, as they went into camp that night, the last before reaching the retreat of the road-agents.

As it drew near sunset, he called to Monte, and the two walked off together for a last private talk over their intended action upon reaching the outlaws' retreat.

To prevent attracting Jessie's attention to their secret conference, the chief had said that, as they had gone earlier into camp than usual, they would go off and bring in some game.

Hardly had they left the camp, when Pete came up to where Jessie sat before her tent.

She did not wear the same happy look she had been wont to, for intuitively she knew that there was something going wrong.

"Missy."

"Yes, Lucas."

"I has suthin' that I wants ter say ter yer."

"Well, Lucas?"

"I has wanted ter fer some time, only I didn't dare ter do so afore."

"Your manner tells me that it is important, Lucas."

"It is so important, missy, that if ye tells the boss what I has ter say, he'll kill me right dead in my tracks."

"Why, Lucas, you amaze me."

"Quick! tell me if anything is wrong?"

"Everything is going wrong, missy."

"Lucas, I command you to let me know the truth."

"See here, missy, if I tells you what I knows, you has got to show nerve enough for half a dozen men, and you has got ter be jist as sweet as ever, should the boss come back afore I kin arrange what I wishes ter, fer your good and mine."

"I promise to keep my nerve, under all circumstances, Lucas."

"You has got grit, I knows, missy, fer I has seen it, and if yer will jist keep up yer courage, I will help you out of a bad fix, a mighty bad fix."

"I am waiting, Lucas, to know all."

"I has wanted ter do so afore, missy; but then I knowed it were onpossible, and you might break down under the news."

"But now we is not thirty miles from the Overland Trail here, for I knows this country well, and we kin reach the stage station afore morning, and catch the coach going east, so as to escape 'em, as they can't follow our trail in the night."

"Lucas, will you tell me what you mean?"

"Yes, missy, I is coming to it; but yer see I has ter arrange ahead o'time, so as ter git away safe, as, if I is taken, lady, that is the end o' this nigger, and I hain't in noways prepared ter die yet, missy."

Seeing that the negro would tell his story in his own way, and assured that there was something terrible for her to hear, Jessie, with what patience she could command, awaited the revelation.

The words of the negro, in addition to her own suspicions, and, in spite of herself, the changing feelings she held toward her husband, prepared the poor woman for some shock which it would require all of her nerve to combat.

And so in deepest suspense she awaited the story which the negro had to tell.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PETE'S STORY.

"It is nearing sunset, Pete," said Jessie, as a means of hastening the negro in his story.

"Yas, missy, and I has considerable ter tell yer, so must let my tongue move peart."

"Yer hes heard ther boss call me Pete, several times, missy, and correct hisself?"

"Yes, often."

"Well, my name is Pete, missy."

"You are not Lucas, then?"

"No, missy, I were a soldier in the army, and come from South Carolina, where my old master lived."

"They was good folks, missy, and always taught me to be a good nigger, and I only wishes I was back on the old plantation now."

"But I got a chance ter pick up some money in the army that didn't belong ter me, and the devil made me do it."

"Oh, Lucas!"

"Well, missy, I runned off with the nigger that tempted me, and we took the best horses in the regiment with us."

"Deserted?"

"Yas, missy, we did, and the Injuns tuck us some days arter."

"My friend he was wounded and died; but the Injuns tuck me ter burn me to ther stake, and if it hadn't been that some white folks run in on 'em this nigger would hev been ashes now."

"Waal, them folks as saved me was two Mormon gents."

"Mormons?" cried Jessie, in a tone of horror.

"Yas, missy, they was Mormon Danites, what believes in a man havin' as many wives as he kin convenient keer fer."

"They was elders, as they called themselves, and was going to Texas a-converting folks, along with a band of Danites who hed a chief."

"I was so thankful I went with 'em, and I stuck to 'em, too."

"They settled in Texas, as cowboy ranchers, and got a few cattle ter make-believe; but they was converting folks all the same on ther sly."

"Waal, we was there nigh onter a year when one of 'em got kilt, and we never seen him ag'in."

"Then ther Danite chief come to ther cabin, and he tells how the Mormon Mission in Mexico was to be broke up, and we, my boss, me and ther chief, were ter start back ter Utah."

"Then I were told ter pretend that my name were Lucas, and ter take two letters ter a ranch for ther gent and young leddy thet lived there."

"I was a foolish nigger, and I did it, and I tuck back your and your pa's answer to ther chief."

"My answer, and my father's?"

"Missy, I told yer I hed shockin' news fer yer, and I hes."

"Now don't get skeert and cry, but keep your narve and I'll help yer out o' yer trouble this very night."

"I am listening, Lucas—I mean Pete," said Jessie, in a voice that had suddenly become hoarse with suppressed emotion.

"Now, missy, this Danite chief he hed a twin brother a-livin' on a ranch of his own, and though I didn't suspect then all as went on, it cum ter me arter, when too late to be of sarvice ter you."

"The chief hed been tuck in by his brother and keerd fer, though he had been dirt mean to him in the past, and he had no heart but ter play a mighty wicked plan ter rob him."

"So he sent his twin brother, the ranchero, away on some excuse inter Mexico, and tuk letters he wrote fer you and your pa, and wrote others ter suit hisself, and I was ter play I was Lucas, from the ranch, and take 'em to yer."

"This I did, and then the cowboy elder was ter play parson, and we was ter go to yer house and the chief was ter marry yer—poor missy, I is hurtin' yer I know, but don't groan so, fer I intends ter save yer this night," and the negro's voice quivered with emotion as he beheld the bent form of the girl swaying to and fro, her face buried in her hands while she moaned like one in greatest physical suffering.

"Missy, thet Danite chief, ther twin brother o' ther Texan, and his adzack image, for I seen t'other one onst, jist fooled you and your pa inter believin' he were a honest man."

"And, missy, he wanted ter pretend clean through he was his brother, fer he determined ter git rid of all who know'd he wasn't."

"Yer recommends thet Parson Maybaw, as they call the elder, died on the trail?"

"Waal, missy, ther chief kilt him, fer I seen him do it."

"Oh, God!"

"He kilt him, missy, by driving his knife inter his back."

"I c'u'd do nothin', so I kept awful quiet, as it would not do fer us ter try ter find ther way through ther country from that point."

"I knew I'd stand no chance in Santa Fé, so I said nothing, and I come on with you to save you in the end, missy."

"When the Mexican comed the chief said he was an officer; but he hain't, missy, for he is a Danite too, and one as robbed the band the chief was captain of and ran off."

"He went to his home in Mexico, and was going to join the outlaws when he come up with us."

"He and the chief talked it all over in French right afore me; but my old master had a plantation on the lower Mississippi, where all the niggers speaks French, and I larnt it there when

I went with him, and I was a year in Paris with my young master, so I jist know'd all they was sayin'."

"It seems now that the chief knows folks is a pursuin' him, and as he is a renegade Danite, he hes got only ter go and join the outlaws, and this he is going ter do."

"When he and the Mexican left the camp day before yesterday evening, I asked you ter help me in my work, while I went arter a pistol I had dropped."

"Missy, I trailed the chief and the Mexican, and they went off and got the box the Mexican had stolen and hid."

"Now, missy, I wants ter also tell yer thet ther man as joined us on ther way were Elder Sterling, ther one who hed charge o' ther Mexican Mormon Mission."

"I sneaked and heerd him tell the boss how he hed come ter Mexico and ordered them north, sent ther women converts home and all that, and I is sart'in it were ther chief's brother who did and was mistook for him, for he said he was with Bugler Charlie, whom you knows as Colorado Carl, and who lived with the Texas ranchero."

"Now this is what scared the chief so, for I guesses he had arranged to have his brother kilt and it missed fire, though this I does not know for a fact, only I believes so."

"And, missy, the elder who was kilt in the fight we had with the Injuns, was going to report the chief to the Mormon prophet for running off and marrying you—"

"Marrying?" came in a gasp from the white, dry lips of the poor woman.

"Yas, missy, for the elder were one time a regular preacher, as yer kin see by lookin' over ther papers the boss tuk from his body, and which I stole fer you and has."

"God bless you!" came in a voice full of gratitude.

"But I was sayin', missy, that when the elder died in the Injun fight I seen the chief shoot him myself, and thet left only me fer him to get rid of."

"And me?"

"Yas, missy; but I intends ter get him rid of us this night, fer, as I tells yer, ther Overland Trail is but thirty miles away, and I knows ther station well."

"Then, to-morrer is Friday, and the East-bound coach goes by at dawn, for I is well acquainted in this latitude, I is."

"Then we kin light out fer the East, and the chief can't foller our trail ontill morning."

"Yer hes my bag o' money, and thet will be a big help fer us, if yer hain't got more, and I jist happens ter know whar thar is a leetle I kin borrow."

And Pete grinned as he remembered the hiding-places where the two Danites had stowed away their treasure.

"So, missy, you pretend ter be sick ter-night, and go inter yer tent, and when yer hears me begin ter whistle, creep out under the canvas in the rear and go right back up ther canyon."

"I'll have the horses there all ready, and we kin ride fer it, for I knows ther way."

"Does yer understand, missy?"

"Yes, I'll not fail you, my good friend."

And Jessie was surprised how thoroughly she had mastered herself after the bitter story she had heard of the crimes of the man to whom she was bound as a wife.

CHAPTER XXX.

UNDER SUSPICION.

It might be that as he returned from his tramp with Monte, the Mexican, Branch Bainbridge saw Pete hastily run away from where Jessie stood, and pretend to be busy with his duties, that aroused his suspicion that something was going wrong for him.

But he was suspicious, and became more so when he found supper was not ready, the fire not even being burning well.

The two Mexicans were as usual playing cards together, and gambling, but he went to them and asked in Spanish, which he spoke well:

"What has that black rascal been doing since I left the camp?"

"I saw him talking to the señora, señor," was the answer.

"All the time since we have been away?"

"Yes, señor."

"You could hear nothing that he said to her?"

"No, señor, but the señora cried a great deal."

"Cried?"

"Yes, señor."

With this the chief moved on into camp.

He was carrying a fine deer he had shot, and it was just sunset, so that he drove from his face every expression of the fury that filled his heart, and called out cheerily:

"See, Jessie, I have a fine deer; but that lazy fellow has not even begun to get supper."

"I had heaps ter do, boss, but I'll soon hab all ready," answered Pete.

"Why, Jessie, how ill you look!"

"What ails you, my dear?"

"I am not well, and if you will excuse me, I will retire to my tent and lie down."

"Lucas can bring me some supper, for I may be able to eat something."

"I will bring it myself; but your looks distress me."

"I'll be all right in the morning," was the answer, and she hastened to her tent, fearing to betray what was surging through her heart at sight of him.

She quickly laid down upon her blanket couch, while the chief walked over to the negro and said:

"What have you been saying to my wife, Pete, to make her seem so wretched?"

"Lor', boss, I hain't spoke a word to her sin' you left de camp, sah, 'deed I hain't, and when I does talk to her I says only cheerful things ter make her laugh and show her pretty snow teef, sah," and Pete told the lie without a twinge of conscience or the shadow of an expression on his face that was not the very soul of truthfulness.

But Pete did not know what the Mexican had seen and told, or he would have been alarmed for his own safety.

"Well, she seems really ill, and don't let me catch you about the tent again."

"Yes, sah, I'll take her a nice supper."

"If you do I'll use you for my revolver target."

"Lor', boss, whas has I did makes yer so hot with me?" and Pete looked the very picture of innocence.

"Keep away from that tent," and with this the chief turned upon his heel and walked away.

He was more troubled than he cared to admit, for he doubted the negro, and feared that he might have told Jessie the truth about the fraud perpetrated upon her.

He knew her brave nature, and that she would brave anything; but that she could escape from him he did not believe for a minute.

He knew that upon the morrow he must tell her all that he had decided she should know; but he did not wish her to learn from Pete what he would not make known to her.

The more he thought over the matter, the more he was convinced that Pete had betrayed him.

Jessie's haggard face and altered manner, for he saw a change in spite of herself and her perfect control, convinced him that he was right, and so he decided that when he had told his story to her, then Pete would have to suffer.

Pete lost no time in getting supper, and set before the Mexican and the chief a very tempting repast, while he loaded the tin plates of the two Mexicans with enough for half a dozen men.

"Maybe it make 'em sleepy," he muttered, to eat so much.

"I only wish I had a leetle p'izen, and I guess the four of 'em wouldn't wake up arter eatin' supper this night."

"No, they sleep ontill jedgment; but I wouldn't let him know I hed p'izened 'em, and as dead folks don't want no money and sich, I guess I'd git rich."

"But I hain't got the p'izen."

The Mexican lighted his cigar after supper, while the chief took some supper into the tent to his wife.

Feeling the need of strength she ate it, and telling the chief that she wished to sleep, he left her.

Then he joined the Mexican in a cigar, and the two sat together for over half an hour, talking.

"Did you not hear whistling?" asked the chief, suddenly.

"Yes, awhile since, but it was Pete."

The chief made no reply, but rose and softly entered the tent.

"Jessie!"

No answer came, and he quickly felt upon the blanket bed.

Dashing out of the tent he said hoarsely:

"Follow me, Monte!"

He just caught sight of a form in the distance, where the firelight, suddenly flaring up, had fallen upon it.

He knew the form but too well.

It was Jessie.

She was gliding up the canyon and he hastily followed, though noiselessly.

The Mexican, knowing not what was the matter, followed the chief, and the two glided on up the canyon out of sight.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SERPENT STRIKES.

WITH the first sound of a whistle, that came from the lips of Pete, Jessie arose from her couch and at once prepared to leave the tent.

She had gathered together what things she could carry, and making them into a small bundle had them at hand.

Still dressed as a boy, she had placed in the bundle a dress and other things needful, not caring to run the risk of other eyes in male attire.

What her purpose was she had not decided.

She only wished to escape from her now intensely-hated husband.

Once she had escaped, and was free, she would decide as to the future.

Gathering her bundle she slipped under the canvas wall of the tent and hastened up the canyon.

She had heard the voices of the two Danites in low conversation, as they sat near the fire in front of her tent smoking their cigars, for the Mexican was an inveterate smoker and had brought a larger supply of tobacco with him from Mexico, than he had provisions.

The two other Mexicans were at their own camp, gambling by the firelight as was their custom, for no guard was set, as neither Branch Bainbridge nor Monte deemed it necessary in the place they then were encamped.

The flaring up of the firelight had startled Jessie as she glided along, and she sprung to the shadow of a thicket.

She did not dream that she had been seen, and so held on up the canyon, which was obstructed here and there by thickets.

After a walk of a couple of hundred yards, a voice in the darkness said:

"Missy, dat you?"

"Yes, Pete; quick, take my bundle and strap it to your saddle."

"Yas, missy; I has de horses right up de canyon a few steps, and we is all right now, so we is."

He took the bundle, led the way, and a moment after came to two horses that were hitched near.

"Dey is de chief's, missy, and de Mexican's—de very best."

"Now I is ready."

"May I ask where you are going, Jessie?"

Like a death-sentence the words fell upon the ears of poor Jessie, while Pete seemed paralyzed with fear, and then suddenly started to bound away.

But Mexican Monte had him covered with his rifle and said:

"Don't move, Pete."

Then came, in a ringing voice, from Jessie:

"You ask where I am going, Mr. Bainbridge, and I will tell you."

"I have long felt that I made a mistake in marrying you. I have felt a change of heart against you, for I do not believe you to be the man I thought you were, true and noble."

"My love changed to hate, and so I decided to leave you, to go again to my old father and tell him I had made the mistake of my life."

"I decided to no longer have you as a shadow upon my life, and so I told Lucas here that he must take me to the Overland Trail, where I could catch the stage eastward, westward, anywhere."

"He demurred, but I had heard him say that he knew this part of the country, having been a soldier here some time ago, and I heard you and Captain Monte talking of the Overland being near."

"I therefore commanded Lucas to take me, planned how I should escape from the camp, and offered him a bribe which few white men would not be tempted by."

"Has he been the traitor and secretly warned you, or did your watchful care of me cause you to suspect my intentions?"

"Lor' bress dat sweet lady."

"De lie she hab tell do sound sweeter than any truth I ever listen to," mentally said Pete.

The chief had listened in silence to the explanation of Jessie, who he saw was fully aroused.

Then he said in his quiet way, for he meant to have no outbreak with her:

"Your explanation, Jessie, has saved the life of this negro."

"Lor' bress her!" ejaculated Pete.

"I had suspected he was playing the part of a traitor to me, but your words clear him, and as he was acting for money, and I had never told him not to obey you, I will spare him."

"Otherwise I would shoot him down as I would a dog."

"Then I was right in leaving a man of your nature, one who holds life so cheaply," and Jessie was delighted at having brought the censure upon herself and saved poor Pete.

"I am not the one to submit to a wrong, Jessie, and I believed that Pete had trumped up stories about me, while you, believing, had felt that you should desert me."

She observed that he had said Pete instead of Lucas, and she asked:

"Who is Pete?"

"Lucas, I mean, for his name is Peter Lucas."

"Ah, yes; but what stories of you could he tell?"

"I said I thought he had trumped up stories about me, for he can tell nothing."

"But I have a story to tell you, something I meant to tell you to-morrow, but which I will now make known to you, if you will come to your tent."

"Lucas, take those horses back, and remember I am in no good humor with you."

"I doesn't blame yer nuther, boss; but I was arter makin' a fortin all ter onst, sah."

Stepping up to Monte the Mexican, who had been a silent witness of all that was said and done, the chief whispered something to him in a low tone.

The Mexican nodded and kept his position, while the Danite chief slipped his hand into Jessie's arm and said:

"Come, Jessie, and hear what I have to say to you."

She shuddered and would have drawn away; but in a moment it flashed upon her to show no feeling, and she walked along calmly by his side.

She had already decided that next time there would be no failure to escape.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AS THE DANITE TOLD IT.

THAT poor Jessie was crushed by the bitter disappointment of failing to make her escape, there was not the shadow of a doubt; but her splendid nerve served her well, and in the story which she told, to save Pete, her presence of mind was shown in a marked degree.

She did not wish the Danite chief to know that she was conscious of all that he was.

She was determined that he should believe that his suspicious conduct alone had changed her feelings toward him.

Her one failure to escape but made her stronger in her determination to yet do so, and Pete she knew would still remain her staunch friend.

So it was that she permitted the Danite to clasp her arm as he walked with her to the camp.

His touch to her now was such as she might feel from coming in contact with a snake.

Yet she was as serene as a May morn outwardly, though her heart and brain seemed to be on fire.

On returning to the tent, Monte was not asked to resume his seat by the fire, so said good-night and went to his blankets under a shelter which his Mexican hirelings had made for him.

Those two worthies had given up gambling simply because one had won all the money the other had, except a peso to start on the next night.

So they had also gone to their blankets.

Pete put the horses back where he had taken them from and sought his blankets, congratulating himself upon having escaped with his life.

His thankfulness was so great toward Jessie, that he surprised himself by offering a prayer for her, the first prayer he had uttered since he had left the plantation in South Carolina.

Upon reaching the tent, Jessie had seated herself so that it would be impossible for the chief to see her face, while he was compelled to sit in a position where the firelight fell upon his countenance.

"You said you had something to tell me, so pray let me hear it, for I am very tired and wish to retire," she said.

"You were not too tired to attempt a long night ride of it, Jessie," he said quietly.

"That was because I wished to escape being with one whom I now see I made a mistake in wedding as I did."

"What mistake did you make?"

"I do not love you, Mortimer."

"Ah, Jessie, don't say that, for you are dearer than all the world to me."

"And yet see how you treat me?"

"To what do you refer?"

"You said that you were going East, and you have dragged me along for weeks through a country full of peril, and herding with the lowest of men."

"Jessie, I meant to take you East, when I made you my wife, but I have since then heard news that prevents my going."

"What news?"

"News of a very painful nature to me."

"Where did you hear it?"

"At Santa Fé."

"How?"

"I had a messenger sent me there with letters."

"Why did you not tell me then?"

"Because I loved you; because I did not wish to shock you."

"Tell me what it is."

"Well, Jessie, I must unfold a story to you of seeming crime; but the truth is, I am innocent."

"Of what are you accused?"

"A murder was committed in my native State and I was accused of it."

"Circumstantial evidence was against me, and upon that alone I was convicted and sentenced to be hanged."

"I was sent to prison to await my day of execution, but innocent at heart, I determined not to die, so made my escape."

"As I regained my liberty I was confronted by a guard."

"He seized me, and, a powerful man, I saw the gallows rise before me if taken back, so I killed him to make my escape."

"I became a wanderer, settled at last in Texas and met you."

"I dared not tell you of my past life, and so I was cruel enough to make you my wife by deceit."

"I had hoped for a pardon, and all seemed to favor my hope; but letters overtook me at Santa Fé, as I said, telling me my pardon was re-

fused, in spite of the proof of my innocence having been established, because I had taken the life of the guard, and hence I was to be captured and hanged for that.

"The man who brought this news told me also that the pursuers were then upon my track.

"So you see I am a haunted man, and fly to the only safety open for me.

"Loving you as I do, I could not give you up, so dragged you into my flight, and am taking you with me now."

"Where?"

"First let me say that in my trouble and alarm for fear of losing you, I did things which caused you to mistrust me.

"I have felt that you were slipping from me, yet what could I do?"

"Now, Jessie, I have told you all."

"No."

"What else would you know?"

"Where are you going?"

"To find safety among a mountain-band of outlaws. I am ashamed to confess it."

"To become an outlaw?"

"Well, the chief I once served well, and so I determined to seek his protection, knowing that he would grant it me."

"And you will aid him, I suppose, in his outlaw acts?"

"I have decided no more now than to crave his protection."

"If he refuses it?"

"Then Heaven only knows what will become of me."

"If he grants it?"

"Well, we will then decide what is best to be done, for, after the noise of my escape has blown over, we can seek another land, and I can atone for this step I now take."

"And Captain Monte?"

The question was unexpected, but he replied:

"I have to confess to you that he is also a fugitive from Mexico."

"And is to become your fellow outlaw?"

"Yes."

"And I?"

"You, Jessie?"

"Yes; do you expect to drag me down to your level?"

"You are my wife, Jessie, and will not desert me."

"I am your wife, yes, and you won me under the cloak of honor, and now your own lips unmask you as a fugitive from justice and going to become an outlaw."

"I will go with you, Mortimer Bainbridge, because I have to; but some day between you and me there will come a time of reckoning."

"I have heard your story, so now leave me alone in my misery, for it is preferable to being with you, and remember that I become an outlaw's wife only because I am at your mercy," and Jessie entered her tent, leaving the Danite chief awed by her words and manner.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

It is time now to return to the noble man who had been the victim of a brother's merciless treachery, and who, at last aroused to hit back, had started upon the trail of the one who had robbed him of his lady-love, his firm comrade being the ex-detective, Colorado Carl, whom he had wounded in a lawless raid, and then, by kindness, rescued him from a life of evil.

The pursuers on the trail of the Danite and his party were utterly at a loss to follow the fugitives beyond a certain point, it will be remembered, and the reader, who has accompanied Branch Bainbridge in his flight, is well aware that he made no effort to cover up his trail.

The real cause of his trail being lost to Mortimer Bainbridge, the Texan ranchero, was on account of prowling bands of Indians happening to be upon the war-path just at the time the Danites passed along.

Dread of the red-skins drove in all the roving whites, and there was no one from whom to make inquiry regarding the Danite chief's being seen.

It will be remembered that one of these roving bands of Indians attacked Branch Bainbridge, and thus the trail of all who had gone before them was obliterated.

The opinion of Colorado Carl, that Branch Bainbridge, a fugitive from Texas, and a renegade Danite, not daring to go to Salt Lake City, would therefore cast his fortunes, as many others had done, with the strong band of mountain robbers, was pretty near the truth.

But still he did not dissent from the belief of the ranchero, that he had gone on to Salt Lake.

With Cinthy and Dixie along, it was not the easy matter for the ranchero and Colorado Carl it would have been had they not been with them.

But the ranchero had brought Cinthy, hoping he would overtake the Danite and she would be of great service to Jessie on the way back.

Cinthy was a strong young negress, a good rider, brave, and could stand any amount of fatigue, while Dixie was one to fight anything with the ranchero to back him.

In her male attire the woman seemed to be content, and if they could only overtake the one the ranchero sought, then Dixie and his wife would laugh at all the troubles, dangers and hardships they had passed through.

It was on account of hoping to return soon with Jessie that Mortimer Bainbridge clung to his pack-horses and so many traps, for he wished to make her comfortable on the journey home.

Having formed the bold determination to risk all and go at once to Salt Lake City, after the trail had been lost, Colorado Carl was told to strike for the stronghold of the Mormons.

"You wish to make the venture, then?" said Carl, as, several days after, they were moving toward a camping-place for the night.

"Certainly."

"You are most apt, I admit, chief, in all the signals and duties of a Danite, but then so many things will occur to catch you off your guard."

"I admit all that, Carl."

"You may meet with those who were the Danite's intimate friends, and whom you will not of course know, sir."

"I have thought over all the perils to face, Carl, and if you will guide me, I will go."

"I do not fear for myself, sir, for I am all right."

"No one knows that I was a make-believe Mormon, and I have special secret countersigns from the prophet himself to protect me."

"But do you see yonder ridge?"

"Yes."

"We will camp there, and it is an old haunt of the Danites, for I have been there several times."

"Your brother's own guard had their quarters there for several weeks, and there is where I first met him, when I was riding courier."

"We may find it a good camping-place, Carl."

"Oh, yes, sir, we will, and that is the place I was making for."

"There is an ice-cold spring in the rocks, plenty of grass for the horses and plenty of wood."

"I remember finding, on one occasion, a hiding-place which I would defy even the noted scout, Buffalo Bill, to discover."

"I happened upon it by accident, and if you wish a secure retreat for Dixie and Cinthy, whom we dare not take into Salt Lake with us, it is the spot."

"A good idea indeed; but about their horses?"

"There is room for a dozen there, and enough grass to support them for a couple of months."

"Does no one know of the spot?"

"Not a soul, I believe, other than myself, and if we find that the Danite has not been into Salt Lake, but has joined the outlaw band, the Toll-Takers, it will be the very place for our retreat, from whence we can begin work for the recapture of Miss Noland."

"And my revenge," was the low response of the ranchero.

"Yes, sir, of course."

"How far is it from Salt Lake?"

"Sixty miles, about."

"And from the retreat of the outlaws?"

"Well, they have several retreats, but operate mostly about the trails from fifteen to fifty miles from here."

"Well, we can leave Dixie and Cinthy what supplies we have, and bring them more in a few days if we find we have to remain in Salt Lake City to attain our purpose."

"Ah, yes, that is the old camp you spoke of, and it seems to have been fortified."

"It had a barrier of trees for defense, as you see, and also to form a corral for the horses."

"One night when I came here with dispatches, there was a robbery of the treasure-box, I remember."

"The treasure-box of a Danite cavalry force?"

"Yes, sir, and it was your brother's command."

"The night was a stormy one, and the box was stolen out from the rear of the chief's tent, which was cut, but not a soul could find out what became of the box."

"A handsome young Mexican officer was suspected, as he was seen in the rear of the tent by the guard; but no treasure was found upon him, and he was sent under a guard to the prophet, but made his escape, it was supposed by killing the two men who had been in charge, for he was a daring fellow."

"And the treasure was never found?"

"No, sir, and it was a mystery as to what ever became of it, for it was a large and heavy chest."

"By the Star of Texas, Colorado Carl, but there is your treasure-box," and Mortimer Bainbridge spurred forward, threw himself from his horse and bent over the box.

Then he called out:

"See, there is no money; but here are lots of papers, and they are Danite papers, too!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SECRET RETREAT.

The finding of the Danite treasure-box was

a surprise to both Colorado Carl and the ranchero.

The former had just told of the robbery of the box, and how no one could account for its mysterious disappearance from the camp.

Now they came upon that very box, in that camp.

And more, they saw that the opening of the box was of recent date, for the papers lay there unharmed, and no rain had fallen since they had been taken from the box.

This was proof of how late had been the finding of the treasure by the robber.

To men who read signs as the ranchero and Colorado Carl did, this was all very plain.

They saw that the robber had in some way hidden the box the night of his robbery, and had only of late had time to come back and get its contents.

It was the treasure he wanted, not the papers, and taking these, he had gone, leaving the box and the packages there, seemingly wholly indifferent about them.

"Carl?"

"Yes, chief."

"If Branch Bainbridge went to Salt Lake, this would not be far off his trail?"

"No, chief."

"We have seen various trails of late, but of course could not set them down as his."

"No, señor."

"The last one we observed near here had the tracks of twelve horses, I believe."

"Yes, we counted that many different tracks, chief."

"Well, he may have been joined by others, and I have the idea that the Danite chief robbed himself, or, in other words, robbed the paymaster of the Mountain Guard, concealed this box, and only now has been able to return for it."

"I believe you are on the right trail, chief; but would he not have taken the papers also?"

"It would seem that he would; but he may have forgotten them."

"Now, this ground leaves no trail, and we cannot discover just who came here; but let us take the box, for Dixie can carry it in front of him and seek the secure hiding-place you spoke of."

"To-morrow we can rest, fixing Dixie and Cinthy up comfortably, and also look over those papers."

"A good idea, chief," said Colorado Carl, and he handed up the box to Dixie, while the ranchero took the papers.

Then Colorado Carl mounted his horse and led the way along the ridge.

The nature of the ground was such that it left no trail, and at last the ex-detective stopped at what appeared to be the edge of a precipice of considerable height.

The edge was fringed all along with a thick growth of stunted trees, which one could see over the tops from the saddle.

"Well, Carl, you have missed your way, and we'll have to go back," said the ranchero.

"No, chief, we go down here."

"Over this cliff?"

"Yes, chief."

"You will excuse me, I hope."

Colorado Carl smiled, dismounted, and approached a spot between two of the trees, pushed aside the branches and entered, leading his horse.

It seemed, when the foliage shut him from view, that he had gone over the cliff; but the ranchero dismounted and followed, the two negroes doing the same.

As he passed through the fringe of foliage, the ranchero saw that Carl had turned to the left, going along the narrow shelf on the edge of the cliff.

He followed, and soon saw the guide begin to descend.

With some care, but without hesitation, Dixie and Cinthy followed, leading their own and the two pack-animals, who did not balk at the perilous way.

Down the cliff they went by a narrow shelf, and winding around it soon came to a miniature valley completely overhung by towering cliffs, on the summits of which were rugged pines.

If there was any egress or ingress to the valley, except by the way they had come, the ranchero failed to discover it.

"How did you find it, Carl?" asked the ranchero, admiringly.

"I followed a wounded deer here."

"He ran through the fringe of foliage, and, I supposed, had gone over the cliff, so I pushed through to look down."

"His blood-trail led along the cliff as we came, and I followed it and found my deer yonder, dead, by the spring."

"Is there no other opening?"

"None, for I spent a couple of days investigating the place."

"These crags you see overhanging us are the cliffs of ridges which a man cannot climb, for I have tried, to get a look down into this valley."

"There are deer that come here now and then to feed, and we can get all the game we wish."

"The water is splendid and finds an outlet through a tunnel under the mountain, and you see how luxuriantly the grass grows."

"See, what a place for a camp, and a barrier across the cliff-path will prevent the horses from straying back again, while no trail leads to the cliff, and it will take a long time and much passing to wear a way through the trees that will attract attention."

"From this rock, you see, one can command the path down and keep back a dozen men."

"It is a beautiful spot, Carl, and we will make it our retreat."

"What do you think of it, Dixie?"

"Mars' Mort, it am jist splendiferous, sah."

"And you like it, Cinthy?"

"Yas, Mars' Mort, I does enjoy it amazin'."

"Then you would not be afraid to remain here for a few days while we go on to Salt Lake City for provisions, and to see if the Danite is there whom I seek?"

"No, sah, for I knows you too well to feel you'd leave us in danger," Cinthy replied.

"Well, we will rig up a little cabin and make you comfortable, and we will leave you ample provisions, while, Dixie, you can kill some game, only be careful not to go far, if you have to go outside, and do not leave anything to trail you by."

The place soon presented the appearance of a very comfortable camp, and even the fire could be hidden so as to attract no observation from its light by night, while by day they would not build one so that the smoke could be seen.

The barrier across the cliff path was made and the horses turned loose, and greatly they seemed to enjoy it.

Then the ranchero and Colorado Carl sat down to look at the papers they had found, and what they discovered seemed to give them the greatest satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DANITE DETECTIVE.

THE light of the camp-fire blazing so cheerily, allowed the ranchero and Colorado Carl to read the papers found near the Danite treasure-box.

The little vale was a small camping-place, and both Dixie and Cinthy seemed delighted with the situation and not in the least nervous about remaining there alone.

The two friends, for they had become such, sat by the firelight looking over the tell-tale papers, for what stories did they not tell.

Branch Bainbridge's love of gold had caused him to go off and forget papers which he had often longed to get.

These were stories of the past sealed up in a leathern pocketbook, which told how criminal the life he had led, and yet he had kept with him the damning proof one day to appear against him.

Then, too, there were his secret orders from the prophet, with plans of the Mormon lines about the city, the Danite seal, which only a chief could have possession of, and much information of a most important character.

Over it all the two went together, the ranchero and Colorado Carl, and then the former said:

"Carl, we could ask for no more than this."

"No, chief."

"With such information, added to your knowledge of the Danites and Mormonism, there is nothing to fear."

"No, chief."

"You understand what I mean?"

"In going into Salt Lake there is nothing to fear?"

"Yes."

"Unless you should meet the Danite."

"My brother?"

"Yes, sir."

"What if I did?"

"Then you would be in terrible danger."

"Carl?"

"Yes, sir."

"I would like to meet him there."

"But not to expose yourself to arrest and death?"

"Oh, no."

"It would follow awful quick, sir, for I know these people."

"You are a good Mormon, Carl."

"Supposed by the Mormons to be, sir."

"I understand all that you can teach me about them?"

"Yes, you are an apt pupil, chief."

"These papers will teach me far more."

"Without a doubt, sir."

"Well, I should like to meet my brother there."

Carl shook his head dubiously.

"I would get the best of the meeting."

"With the Mormons to back him?"

"No, they would back me."

"How so, chief?"

"Well, I would at once claim to be Captain Branch, the real Danite chief, and denounce him as the impostor."

"By Heaven! what a daring idea, chief."

"It can be carried out."

"I hope so."

"I would wish no deeper revenge against him than to so denounce him, Carl."

"You would not indeed, sir."

"I have here the papers, too, to prove that I am Captain Branch."

"You have the papers, that is certain."

"I have the signets, the seal, and all to aid my claim."

"It is a desperate, bold plan, chief, but I believe you are the man to carry it out."

"Then I have you to prove I am the real Danite, Carl."

"You make a strong case of it, sir."

"Well, we will go quietly, study up thoroughly in the parts we have to play, and set out for Salt Lake City to-morrow afternoon."

"You say that you know my brother's quarters there?"

"Yes, sir, he has a home that he bought, a pretty little nest not far from the Lion House."

"Well, we will go there at once and put up."

"If he is there, woe be unto him."

"Should he not be?"

"Well, I shall take possession, anyhow, and as a Danite, through force of circumstances, I shall study up on the Mormon questions."

"There is much that I can learn that will be of great use to the United States Government, and so I shall just consider myself a Danite detective."

"Yes, sir, in truth you will be a Danite detective, and I am with you heart and soul, come what may."

"I know that I can trust you, Carl, unto the end."

"To-morrow we start for the Mormon stronghold as Danite detectives."

And they did.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNDER FALSE COLORS.

AT the time of which I write, affairs in the Far West were in a very unsettled state.

There were mining-camps scattered here and there, forts and army-posts, a few settlements, with cattle and other interests, and any quantity of hostile Indians.

Whatever can be said against the Mormons, they at least penetrated the unknown wilderness and established a powerful stronghold in the midst of many dangers, while they began to build up a large city, making a garden out of a desert.

This very circumstance aided much in subduing the Indians, being a kind of half-way ground where a strong support could be morally found, if not actually, as far as the red-skins were concerned.

There were no railroads then penetrating these trackless wilds, and so it was that the Overland stage-trails and those between fort and fort, outpost and settlements and mining-camps were haunted by lawless bands.

From the soldier deserter to the Mexican these bands were composed, the material being the very worst timber for wickedness that can be imagined.

These lawless bands, whether under one leader or separate, struck where and when their victims least expected or were prepared for them.

Merciless they were, killing to rob a coach or to steal a horse, and pursuit of them had seldom done any good.

In the camps many were suspicious of their neighbors, and the wild, reckless, desperado element ruled supreme.

Under such circumstances the danger of a trip from Texas up into Utah may well be understood by the reader.

Drawing into the Mormon dominions, the travelers had even more evils to encounter and subdue.

Robbers infested the Mormon trails and hung about the city to rob and kill.

Many lawless men of the Danite Leagues had turned outlaw wholly, when the Mormon war was over and they found their presumed occupation gone.

The home of the prophet was therefore more like an armed camp than anything else I can liken it to.

The Mormons were suspicious from the prophet down, and Gentiles were regarded as deadly foes.

Signs and countersigns governed the Mormons' intercourse with each other, and bitterest hatred was held toward all outsiders who sought to gain a foothold in their fair city.

A stranger in the city was under the closest espionage all the time, and if once suspected of playing a secret game, he would mysteriously disappear to be heard of no more.

The Mountain Meadow massacre, and later the trial and execution of Major John Lee, the Danite leader, as the one who caused that fearful carnage are of too late occurrence to be forgotten by my readers, and I refer to life as it was then in Mormonland and borderland, to show how daring was the undertaking of the Texan ranchero in going into Salt Lake City as a pretended Danite chief.

But Mortimer Bainbridge was not the man to shrink from any danger, and his faithful ally, Colorado Carl, had a nature that was true as steel and as fearless as a lion's.

Mortimer Bainbridge had much at stake in going.

He was a man of strongest feelings and deep attachments.

He had loved his wicked brother through all the insults of childhood, and his first love for his girl sweetheart he had never forgotten, yet had forgiven that brother who had separated him forever from her.

His love for Jessie Noland was the love of his manhood, deeper, more lasting than any other. He had taken his brother back into his life, into his home, and warmed into life, the viper had struck the most cruel blow of all at his heart.

So it was that Mortimer Bainbridge had vowed vengeance, and was determined to hunt Branch Bainbridge off the face of the earth.

By so doing he would rescue Jessie from a life that must be terrible for her to bear, for he could not believe but that she had already discovered the cheat, that Branch was not himself.

So it was that the Texan ranchero meant to dare much, everything, and with Colorado Carl by his side, boldly rode into the streets of Salt Lake City.

Carl guided the way to the home of the Danite chief, and as they rode along the ranchero was saluted now and then by several who seemed to know him well, but who, of course, took him for his brother.

One called out:

"Glad to see you back again, captain, and will call soon."

"Thank you; do so," was the reply.

"I do not believe that he has returned, Carl."

"So it would seem, sir, from the salutes you have had, for they all appeared like first greetings; but we will soon know, for there is his home."

"That pretty little home yonder, standing by itself?"

"Yes, sir."

"It appears to be closed, Carl, so we are ahead of him."

"And I hope of the lot from the Mexican Mission."

"I wish we had thought to send them to Santa Fé, for their coming would destroy all."

"No, let them come, for we are in for it now, and there is no backing out."

"We are the Danites, Carl, and all others are impostors, who come to denounce us," and the ranchero laughed in sheer recklessness of danger.

They had now reached the little home of Captain Branch, a cozy cottage, with pleasant gardens, ample stable room, and in fact a very attractive place.

A man and a woman, evidently servants, ran out to greet them, and said:

"Welcome home, Captain Branch."

"That settles it, Carl," said the ranchero, as he dismounted, and he added, grimly: "Now I will see if I can play the Danite as successfully as the Danite played the ranchero."

The house was quickly opened by the two servants, and Mortimer Bainbridge crossed the threshold of the Danite's home.

Hardly had he had time to glance about him, when a mounted officer rode up and said:

"The prophet has just heard of the return of Captain Branch, and will give him audience at eight o'clock to-night."

"I shall present myself there, sir, at the stated hour," was the reply of the ranchero, and he added with a sneer:

"Carl, I am honored."

"Let us depart at dark, sir," urged Colorado Carl.

"No, I shall go and see the prophet," was the cool response of the Texan.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

THE Mormon prophet was a man of force and will, while also one of intelligence and certain magnetic influence.

Had he not been, never could he have accomplished what he did with the materials at his command.

He ruled with a rod of iron, and was feared as well as respected by his people.

With the inner working of his government, as a novelist, I have nothing to do; but if one-half the stories of Mormon mysteries are true, then strange indeed were the secret laws governing that very peculiar people.

The prophet was alone in his official quarters when the name of Captain Branch was brought in.

That is, he was seemingly alone when the visitor entered, whoever else might be hidden from general observation.

The prophet did not rise to greet his visitor, but bowed somewhat coldly and said:

"I heard of your arrival, Captain Branch, before you deemed it necessary to report to me your coming."

"You must pardon me, my chief, but I had just come from a long, a very long journey, and went to my home to make myself presentable," and the Danite Detective, as I will call the ranchero, was certainly looking very handsome in the uniform which he had donned to visit the Mormon leader, and which he had found in the house and put on by request of Colorado Carl.

"And where are the elders who went under

your command, sir, to the South, and the converts you promised to bring back to us, Captain Branch?"

"I have come, sir, alone, or rather with a single companion, to make an explanation to you."

"I see no explanation that you can make to palliate your disobedience of orders."

"You will hear me, sir, I hope?"

"Yes, but you left here under a cloud, Captain Branch, and I have heard enough of your deeds since you left to almost set you down as an outlaw."

"There was a robbery of your treasure-box never explained, and it has been reported to me that you were even supposed to have played road-agent upon the trails, aided by some of the most lawless of your command."

"Had I known what I now do, I should have ordered you to the Death Dungeon, instead of giving you a chance to raise the cloud that was upon your life, Captain Branch."

"I will now hear your explanation, sir, of why you return alone from the South."

The Danite Detective realized that he was in very close quarters, and he regretted, when he saw in what an odious light his brother stood with the Mormon leader, that he had not taken the advice of Colorado Carl and gotten out of the place, after he became assured that Branch Bainbridge had not returned there.

But it was too late to repine now, and he could only beard the lion in his den.

So he said:

"I went to Texas, prophet, and placed Elders Mayhew and Amos there as cowboys, where they could also seek converts in the settlements."

"I then went to Mexico, and established a Mission, at the hacienda of a Mexican by the name of Don Miranda."

"Over this Mission Elder Sterling was placed, and in the time that we had to work we secured many converts to our faith."

"And you, sir?"

"I went into Texas visiting the ranches and settlements, and seeking converts among those whom I deemed suitable to become Mormons."

"With what result?"

"All would have been well, prophet, but for the fact that we had a traitor in our midst."

"A traitor?"

"So I said, sir."

"A traitor to the Mormon faith, to Danite laws?"

"Yes, prophet."

"Name him."

"Elder Mayhew," said the Danite Detective, knowing that they had found the elder in his grave on the trail and that he was beyond all harm.

"Then he is doomed."

"He is dead, prophet."

"Dead!"

"Yes, prophet; I left him in a grave back on the trail."

"You did well to kill him, if you could not bring him here for trial."

"That could not be done, prophet."

"Well, what else have you to say?"

"Only that Elder Amos was killed in Texas, and, as Elder Mayhew was a traitor, I at once went to Mexico and disbanded the Mission, for Mexican troops and Texan Rangers knew the whole affair."

"Then I took, with Mexican Charlie, the trail of Elder Mayhew, and am now here to report, prophet."

"You have not done as much wrong as I feared, Captain Branch, and of course you could only disband the Mexican Mission, under the dangerous circumstances of an attack."

"We must give neither the United States nor Mexican Governments any hold upon us."

"I have always liked you, Captain Branch, and regretted that you deemed fit to lead the wild, reckless life you have."

"But I am glad you have returned, for I wish to have you here for two reasons."

"My advisers have urged your being severely dealt with for the past, while I have befriended you, and you are now under probation, pending your return from the South."

"As matters have turned out badly there, through no fault of yours that I can see, I will give you another chance."

"You are most kind, sir, and I hope to prove your confidence has not been misplaced."

"The duty I send you on, sir, is a most important one, and you can, by achieving success, silence your enemies and prove my appreciation of you was not misplaced."

"I will do all in my power, sir."

"Of late, the Overland Trails and the trails about our city have been infested by outlaw bands."

"Valuable trains have been set upon and robbed, coaches have been held up and passengers forced to deliver their all, and my men have been unable to bring the fellows to justice."

"Now and then a man or two of them have been killed, and others run to their haunts; but I already hear that the United States officers are hinting that the outlaws are Danites and under my protection."

"That is a foul charge, prophet."

"Yes, and it remains for you to disprove it, Captain Branch," sternly said the Mormon leader.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE PROPHET'S COMMAND.

"You have but to give me your commands, prophet," said the Danite Detective, calmly, while mentally he wondered how on earth he could disprove the charges made against the Mormons of outlawry.

"You know this country thoroughly, and you are a daring man and skillful commander, Captain Branch."

The prophet paused, and the Danite Detective remained silent.

He had played his part well, and had allowed the prophet to believe that he had killed Elder Mayhew for his treachery.

He had skillfully answered questions and turned points, from the knowledge he had gained in Texas and Mexico through Colorado Carl, which had placed him in a better light with the prophet than Captain Branch had stood.

The papers which he had found had shown that the prophet had well trusted the Danite chief, and it let him into some of the inner acts of the Mormon leader, and which he had intended to make use of if driven to it.

But somehow the chief seemed to be kindly disposed toward him, and in silence he awaited what would come next.

"Now, Captain Branch," resumed the prophet, "I cannot rest under the suspicion of the charge that I protect or harbor outlaws."

"This man, Major Mephisto, as he calls himself, is a renegade Mormon, and he hates me for various reasons, and so gives out the idea that I protect him, for it is to his interest to do so."

"Now it is to my interest to have him captured, or killed, and his band hunted down."

"Do you undertake this for me and I will give you promotion and a reward as well, while it will clear your name with our people of the stain which your own reckless life has put upon it."

"I desire you, I command you, to undertake this work for me, and at once."

"I will gladly do so, prophet."

"I will place at your command a hundred men, all well mounted and armed, and I will give you full power to act as you deem best in the matter; but you are to accomplish the work, for, if you fail, then you are a ruined man among our people."

"Prophet, I undertake the duty with pleasure, and though I would be glad to have half a hundred men encamped in the mountains, where I can call upon them when needed, I would desire to first go alone, or rather with my companion who came with me from Texas, and lay my plans for the hunting down of Major Mephisto and his band."

"I would be glad, therefore, prophet, for you to issue an edict against me, making me an outlaw, or a renegade, and post it upon the trails."

"This will give me a chance to fly to the camps of the outlaws for refuge, and not one will suspect me, so that I can learn their haunts, their forces, and with men of my own at a secret camp to call upon when I need them, I can utterly overwhelm Mephisto and his entire band."

"What think you of my plan, chief?"

"A grand one, and I believe you have the nerve to carry it out, Captain Branch."

"I believe it can be done, sir."

"When will you leave?"

"I will rest to-morrow, sir, and get certain stores I need, and to-morrow night will depart upon my mission, as soon as I have decided where it is best to have the force await in camp, subject to my command, and whose officer must understand the situation, so as to obey me."

"He shall, and no one else, for there must be no failing in this."

"I will get one of my most trusted officers, Captain Branch."

"I thank you, sir; and now there is one thing that I would like to speak to you about, sir."

"I will hear you, Captain Branch."

"It is about one who appears to be my counterpart."

"Who?"

"A man who is said to look strangely like me, sir, and was the intimate friend of Elder Mayhew."

"Ah!"

"What he knows of our Mormon signals and rites, of course I do not know; but he was much with Mayhew, and he has passed himself off for me more than once."

"This is remarkable."

"Yes, sir, and I have reason to believe that he has kidnapped a lady in whom I was interested, and if posted by Mayhew upon the Mormon rites, he may have the daring to come on here, prophet."

"I only hope that he will do so."

"Should he do so, sir, I would ask that he be held in imprisonment until my return, for there is much that I can get from him of information of value to us, once he is in my power."

"I shall see to it that he is held to await your return, Captain Branch."

"And that the lady, should he bring her here, receives your protection, prophet."

"Then the lady is bound to you?"

"She is, sir."

"Then she shall be protected, I promise you."

"I thank you, prophet, and now will bid you adieu."

Then the daring Texan, who was so boldly playing the part of a Danite Detective, left the presence of the Mormon leader, and hastily made his way to the home of his brother.

Colorado Carl was most anxiously awaiting him, for he was nervous as to the result of the interview.

"Welcome back as from the jaws of death, chief," he said, grasping the ranchero's hand.

"Thank you, Carl."

"You saw the prophet?"

"Oh, yes, and he has commanded me to go upon a mission."

"Indeed, sir, and may I ask what it is?"

"To hunt down the band of Major Mephisto."

"Good!"

"We, for you go with me, are to start to-morrow, and I am to have a company of Danites recently camped in the mountains to await my command."

"We must get a quantity of supplies to carry with us, for I will hardly dare return soon to Salt Lake."

"Yes, sir, and we must leave by a trail by which we cannot be tracked."

"Why?"

"Because the prophet trusts no man, and he will send spies to track you and see just where you go and what you do."

"Then being forewarned is being forearmed," was the Texan's reply.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BRANDED.

WHEN the ranchero and Colorado Carl decided that they should not be tracked by any of the Mormon scouts, it would have taken a better man than any then in Salt Lake to follow their trail into the mountains.

Provisions in plenty were purchased, ample ammunition and other things to add to their needs and comfort, and a pack-horse was loaded down with them.

The pack-horse, too, was selected for his qualities of speed and endurance, so as not to be a mere carrier-animal when a better one was wanted.

The supposed Danite had a long talk with the officer who was to command the guard to be placed at his disposal, and, at the suggestion of Colorado Carl, appointed a rendezvous at a very secluded and secure hiding-place in the mountains, not a dozen miles from the retreat which had been selected for themselves, and where Dixie and Cinthy awaited them.

The officer was told to go by night to the spot, and to carry a large supply of stores, so that he would not have to return for them to Salt Lake.

Then the two friends mounted their horses, and, with the pack-animal in lead, started upon their mission into the mountains.

Colorado Carl at once set to work to plan for destroying their trail, as soon as they should branch off from the main trail, and this, by muffling the hoofs of their horses, they did.

It was thus impossible to see where the three horses left the main trail, and any one tracking them would consider that they still held to it.

It was just sunrise when they rode into this secret retreat, and Cinthy gave a shout of welcome at sight of them, and another at the provisions they had brought.

The truth was, the two negroes were beginning to feel alarmed for the safety of the ranchero, and were rejoiced to see him back.

They had done much to help the appearance of the camp, having erected a small log cabin and arranged all as though they expected to stay some time.

After a day and night passed in the retreat, Colorado Carl acted as guide for the ranchero to the retreat of the Danites, which he must know the location of thoroughly.

The young Danite officer and his fifty men were there, and safely encamped to await being called upon.

"You understand, Captain De Foe, that I am to be branded as a renegade and deserter?" said the ranchero.

"Yes, sir, and I have the placards with me to put up on the various trails."

"Very well, sir, set your men to work posting them as soon as you wish, for to-morrow I shall make my way into the retreat of the Toll-Takers."

"You have a mission I do not envy you, Chief Branch," said Captain De Foe.

"It is full of peril, I know, but the result I hope will justify the risk I run."

"I shall, of course, pretend to seek refuge among the Toll-Takers, and after a short stay will be able to understand their moves, know their strength and acquaint myself with all else necessary to aid us in utterly annihilating the outlaws."

"It will not be an easy task, sir."

"No, but it can be done as long as they do not suspect me of trickery toward them."

"I hope to call upon you for your services soon, but it may be that it will be a long time."

"I will be here when needed, chief."

The ranchero soon after took his leave with Colorado Carl, who, ever suspicious of the Mormons, felt certain that they were being tracked, so went by a round-about trail until nightfall, and then at a gallop away toward the retreat, utterly throwing every one off of their track who might be trailing them.

The next day the ranchero bade the two negroes farewell, and started upon his mission, Colorado Carl accompanying him, for he was to go with him as far as the close vicinity of the Toll-Takers' retreat.

Then he was to return to the place where they had left the negroes.

It was the desire of Colorado Carl to make the ranchero as thoroughly acquainted with the country as possible, so that he could the more fully understand the situation.

A perfect borderman, Bainbridge learned readily, and as they crossed the Overland Trail, Carl said:

"We will follow this for a mile and then I will leave you at the stream which winds down the valley."

"The one they call the Valley of the Shadow of Death?"

"Yes, chief, and it got the name from the Overland coaches, which crossed through the upper end, so often being held up and with fatal results—Oh, see there!"

He pointed to a large tree upon the left of the trail, and they halted before it and saw a large placard pinned there.

The placard read:

"\$5,000 REWARD

A RENEGADE DESERTER AND OUTLAW!

"Whereas, Captain Branch, late chief of Mounted Mountain Guard Number One, of Danite League, Mormon Legion, has brought dishonor upon himself and the Mormon church by turning renegade and deserter, be it here known that he is posted as

AN OUTLAW,

and the above reward will be paid for his body, dead or alive. By order of

"THE MORMON RULER."

"Well, that outlaws me, with a vengeance, Carl, and the reward offered may cause some good Toll-Taker to kill and carry me into Salt Lake for what I am worth, dead or alive."

"But now I must leave you, for, if my Danite brother did not go to Salt Lake City, he merely went to join the Toll-Takers, and there I will find him."

"I wish I could go with you, chief."

"No; you can serve me best by being outside."

"And if your brother is there?"

"Then I shall claim to be the real Danite, show my papers to prove it, and denounce him as the spy of the Mormons."

"Good-by!"

And with a grasp of the hand the Texan ranchero rode away upon the trail that would lead him into a danger that was appalling.

Colorado Carl sat upon his horse watching him as he followed the trail down the mountain stream which flowed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where the Toll-Takers were said to have their stronghold, and then, as he disappeared, he muttered:

"He is the bravest of the brave, and were he any other man I would take oath that he had gone straight to his death!"

CHAPTER XL.

"MAJOR MEPHISTO."

THE Toll-Takers had had a severe set-back. They had gathered in full force to attack a valuable Government train which was carrying stores to far frontier outposts, and which was said also to have along a couple of paymasters with strong-boxes full of "greenbacks" which were destined for the payment of the soldiers and Government employees respectively.

The news of the coming of this train had been discussed through the spies of the Toll-Takers, and Major Mephisto had prepared to give it a proper welcome from the outlaw point of view.

It was said to have twenty-one wagons, which of course meant twenty-one teamsters, a lieutenant and six cavalymen as a guard, two paymasters and their clerks, and a couple of scouts—in all thirty-four men, all of whom of course were deemed to be "fighters," and a sufficient protection.

Major Mephisto had once been a United States soldier, but had found more wealth in mining, so had accordingly deserted.

Then he had turned Mormon, and, intrusted with the command of a supply train, had been tempted to rob it, and thus had been forced to take to the mountains with the men who had aided him in his enterprise.

There he found himself in his element as a road-agent, and, showing no partiality, he had robbed all who traveled the trails, until his band became known as Toll-Takers.

Men who had become too wicked for the army camps, mines and settlements, sought a haven of refuge with the Toll-Takers, until at the time that noted outlaw chief was preparing for his attack upon the Government train, he counted as his followers in outlawry just forty-four well-mounted, well-armed, daring desperadoes.

But while Major Mephisto was preparing for his grand *coup d'état* upon the Government train, feeling sure that his two-score men could wipe out the force with the wagons—for he had left but a few in camp—somebody else had hit upon a plan to wipe out the "major and his men."

That somebody was an officer at a frontier post.

Why he had become a surgeon in preference to being a cavalry officer, no one who ever saw him in the field, or upon a trail, could understand, though he had no superior in surgery in the army.

But he was so fond of scouting, Indian-fighting and hunting down outlaws, that he won the name of the "Surgeon Scout," and was oftener off on a trail than at his post in the hospital.

The result was that he became famous as a trailer and Indian-fighter, and officers sent on perilous scouts were only too glad to have him sent along as "surgeon," knowing the value of his services as scout.

The person referred to is Doctor Frank Powell, now a resident of La Crosse, Wisconsin, and the hero of many a romance.

He had a letter from a friend telling him that he was coming west with a train of "empty wagons," sent out for use at the further forts of the frontier.

This caused Surgeon Powell to hit upon a brilliant idea, and seeking the commandant of the fort, he asked if he could not be sent with details of men, some fifty in number, to come west with that train, or at least through the dangerous Toll-Takers' country.

"The soldiers can ride in the wagons, colonel, and we can lay a trap for Major Mephisto," the surgeon had said.

The colonel was glad to grant the request, and Surgeon Frank Powell and fifty soldiers found quarters in the empty wagons.

As Major Mephisto did not know of this reinforcement to the train, and supposed it to be of vast value, he laid his plans to ambush it at a certain point beyond his usual lines.

A canyon through which the train had to pass was to be "choked up" at the upper end, and then the outlaws were to open from ambush and dash in upon the trainmen, completely cutting off escape.

It was a good plot, and but for Surgeon Frank Powell it would have resulted just as the "major" planned.

But when the outlaws opened, the trainmen fled to cover, the major and his men dashed out in grand style, and the surgeon and his brave boys in blue poured a withering fire from the wagons which emptied a score of outlaw saddles.

It was a very short, sharp fight, and the Toll-Takers who escaped were many of them wounded, while nearly all had lost their horses.

It was a close call and a narrow escape from being wiped out, and the one who realized this most was "Major" Mephisto.

He had had his horse shot under him, and been also wounded.

But he got another horse, and as he rode off got another wound.

He had escaped and gained his retreat, and as his demoralized band began to drop in one by one, they were told that the wound of the chief was a very serious one, if not fatal.

This the outlaw leader seemed to realize.

His "surgeon" was a doctor who had decided to make a fortune more rapidly than by the practice of medicine in the town where he was located, so had poisoned a rich aunt, hoping she had made no will and he would be heir.

But she had made a will, he was suspected, so had to fly from the gallows.

He turned up later as surgeon of the Toll-Takers, and understanding his business, he told Major Mephisto that the chances of his living were one to a thousand.

"And not an officer left in whom I have confidence, so that I will not be even avenged," the outlaw leader said.

Just then a man entered his quarters to say that a party of four men, a negro and a boy sought refuge in the retreat, and the leader wished to see the chief.

"Admit him," was the answer, and soon after the guard returned with two men.

They were Branch Bainbridge and Monte the Mexican.

CHAPTER XLI.

INTO A DEAD MAN'S SHOES.

MAJOR MEPHISTO felt no dread of strangers in his camp.

In the first place, he was a good commander, and he knew that though demoralized the band were on duty, and the outposts were guarded.

If any one had passed those outposts, they were not unfriendly to him.

In the second place, he was on the brink of the grave.

He held no longer fear of the gallows, even if those who had come should prove to be foes.

If they were, then the men would have to look out for themselves, and death would take care of him.

"Major Mephisto, it is with deep regret that I see you wounded, but I trust it is not serious."

The speaker was Monte, the Mexican, and he took the hand of the dying outlaw.

"El Monte?" he said.

"Yes, chief, your old friend."

"And now foe, for you of course have my camp; but I am beyond your rope now, unless you would hang a dying man."

"My dear sir, you are all wrong, for I am here as your friend, to ask your help, as I too am an outlaw now."

"You! then you are no longer a Danite officer?"

"No more than is my friend here, Captain Branch."

"We are both renegades, outlawed by the Mormons, and fugitives from justice, have come to seek refuge with you."

"And that is Captain Branch?"

"Yes, sir, and I have come with El Monte to cast my lot with yours," said the Danite leader.

"Strange it is; but there are others with you?"

"I have a boy, a young companion, and a negro servant, with me, and El Monte has two Mexicans."

"There is no trick in all this?"

"How can there be?"

"Where are your Danites?"

"Ourselves and the four named are all."

"In a word, I was sent South on a mission, being then under a cloud with the prophet."

"I failed to accomplish it, and, knowing that death awaited me in Texas, and more fearful punishment if I returned to Salt Lake, I came here to cast my fortunes with yours."

"On the way I met El Monte and his men, and he is a renegade Danite, but saved me from death at the Indians' hands and we became friends once more, talked over our future, and I found that he too was coming to you."

"As a proof of our good will, we decided to offer you a good sum for the position of lieutenants under you, for we come not to you as paupers, Major Mephisto."

"And suppose I accept your terms, what is your means of payment?"

"Here," and they both revealed their treasure, for when Pete had been caught in his attempt to escape, he had quickly returned the treasure he had appropriated to the places he had taken it from.

"Captain Branch, there is an old saying that 'money talks,' and as you are willing to pay, it proves your sincerity."

"I have heard much of you, and I believe, through others, we had some dealings when you were commander of the Mormon Mountain Guard."

"But you are down now, it seems, driven, as I was, to outlawry, and I must say you arrived at a most opportune time."

"I have been defeated by the soldiers under that terror the Surgeon Scout, for I saw him in the fight in command, and he doubtless laid the trap into which I fell."

"Half of my men were killed, and half of those who escaped have wounds."

"We lost one prize, and I have my death-wound."

"You have a few thousands there to divide among the men, for I am beyond need, and you and those with you will add strength to the band."

"I have not an officer left, so you can step into my shoes as chief, keeping my name of Major Mephisto if you wish, and El Monte can be your lieutenant."

"Give the men the money as a proof of your good-will, and I will tell them that you are to step into my shoes."

"They know of you, and some may have served with you."

"Call the band together, Rocket, and I'll tell them the situation," and the dying man spoke with an effort, though his surgeon, who was known to the Toll-Takers as "Doctor Drugs," had said that he would live for several days longer.

The outlaws were called to the chief's quarters, all except the four outposts, and one or two who were badly wounded.

They were a hard-looking set of men, though a few were not so evil-faced as the others.

Armed to the teeth, with a scowl upon their faces at the memory of their terrible defeat and the loss of what they had deemed a prize, with their chief dying, their other officers dead, and no man willing to take the leadership, they were in a humor to be ugly when they assembled at the cabin of Major Mephisto.

There lay the large form of their terrible leader, a man whom they all liked, though they greatly feared him.

His past was a sealed book to them all until he became an outlaw.

He had commanded them well, won money for them, planned, plotted and executed, and

saved them time and again from capture and annihilation, so that, when he had received his death-wound, they forgave him.

In a few words the dying chief told his men that Doctor Drugs said he must die.

Then he said that he made them heirs to what treasure he had stowed away, and more, he had been visited by friends who had come just in time, for he was willing to one of them the position he held, and to the other the place of lieutenant of the band.

As a proof of good faith they desired to divide among them gold which would more than repay them for the loss of the train.

In the man before them, who was to step into the shoes of their chief, the men saw one of whom they had heard, whom some of them knew, and not a word of dissent was heard, while the ugly look upon their faces was dispelled by the sunshine of the gold placed before them for equal division.

Thus did the Danite chief step into the shoes of the dying leader of the Toll-Takers, with El Monte as his lieutenant.

CHAPTER XLII.

A FAIR NURSE.

THE satisfaction of the Danite chief at the success which he had met with he could hardly conceal, as also that he would be seconded by his ally, Monte, the Mexican.

He had not given half the money he had anticipated doing, so was more than pleased at this fact.

The men seemed glad to have a leader whom they had known by name, several personally, for those, too, had been Danites, and they were glad to feel that he had fallen from his high command to become as one of them.

The Mexican was also in the best of humors at the situation, and was rather glad to take second place in the command.

With their party of four men, the negro and Jessie, the band would seemingly be increased by six, for the outlaws were not yet told that one was a woman.

With the score of men which the band could muster, after a few had gotten over their wounds, they would again present a force able to protect themselves once more.

The matter having been settled, the dying chief entered into a secret conversation with Branch Bainbridge.

The latter did not believe that the chief had given his all to the band, and that he must still have something held back, so he was anxious to be very kind toward him and see if he wished to intrust him with any disposition of funds.

To gain his confidence he told him something of his life, and that he had married the daughter of a Texan ranchero who had not known him to be what he was until two days before.

"And does she still cling to you, knowing you now to be an outlaw?" asked the dying man.

"She is here with me, Major Mephisto, for she is the one I referred to as a boy."

"Ah! and she is so supposed to be by the men?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is she?"

"When we reached your outpost, we were halted, and expressing our wish to see you, a guard brought El Monte and myself here, while the other four of our party remained as hostages with your sentinels."

"Captain Branch?"

"Yes, chief."

"I have a favor to ask of you."

"It is granted, sir."

"I thank you."

"I will be only too glad to do aught I can to soothe your last hours."

The dying outlaw was silent a minute and then said:

"Give orders to El Monte to see that the camp is once more under full discipline, and send men to arrange your quarters, which will be in the cabin near me."

"Then order your people brought in from the outpost direct to my cabin."

The Danite obeyed, and when he had returned the chief said:

"Now, Captain Branch, to the favor I would ask?"

"You have but to ask it, major."

"Doctor Drugs will tell you that I am dying, that I may pass away to-night, may last a couple of days, but this wound in my body is fatal."

"I fear so."

"I know so."

"But what I would ask of you is to allow your wife to come here and see me, to act toward me as a nurse."

"I was not always bad, for in the long ago I had a good mother, and a darling, devoted sister."

"She was a dear good girl, and I loved her as sister, sweetheart and friend, for I had no lady-love, and cared for none."

"A man whom I met and liked, and trusted as a friend, I introduced to her, and she loved him."

"In time they were married; but the man was

a villain, an escaped convict, and already had a wife living."

"Captain Branch, my sister took her own life, from shame, and I took his."

"The law wanted my life for his, to carry out the Bible maxim of a life for a life."

"I escaped from the law and became a wanderer."

"Well, after trying to lead an honest career, I gave it up, for I had not strength of character sufficient to resist temptation, and here I am now, dying in the mountains, shot down by former soldier comrades, and with the brand of an outlaw upon me."

"I believe that my old mother still lives, and I often think of her; but for the sake of the past, I wish your wife to come here and be near me until I die, and maybe, with a woman present, I may be able to forget the horrid past."

"I believe I could die easier."

"May she come?"

"Yes, I will bring her at once."

Half an hour later Jessie entered the cabin of the dying outlaw chief.

The Danite had told her of his wish, and she had not shrunk from the demand upon her, but had said:

"Yes, certainly I will go, be he what he may, I cannot refuse the request of a dying man."

"This is my wife, Major Mephisto," said Captain Branch, as he led her into the cabin.

"My God! how beautiful! What! you do not fear to touch my crime-stained hand?"

"No, oh, no, for you are ill and need sympathy and help."

"Let me make you more comfortable," and she did what she could, calling Pete in to get something of her own from the pack-saddles to soften the pillow of the wounded outlaw.

Then she bade Pete go and prepare certain food, and in many ways made her woman's presence felt.

The room was "spruced up," the medicines placed near, for Doctor Drugs had come well supplied into the wilderness, and everything was done to cheer the man and add to his comfort.

The Danite was glad to have Jessie thus occupied, while he walked about the lawless camp, and became acquainted with the situation and his people.

He won favor with the men by at once visiting the wounded with Doctor Drugs, and doing all that he could for them.

The two Mexicans and Pete meanwhile were making a small cabin comfortable for the new chief and his wife, and Monte was looking to the outposts and preparing against an attack should the soldiers pursue them to the valley stronghold, which was considered not unlikely if reinforcements came to them, as they had supposed the Toll-Takers to be but a remnant.

Night came on, and Jessie declared her intention of caring for the chief, with Pete near to be of aid if needed.

The negro had thrown wood upon the fire, and in the chief's lounging-chair she sat before the blazing logs, lost in deep thought, while he slept in seeming peace and without pain.

At last he awoke and said softly:

"I have something to say to you, my sweet nurse."

She arose and approached him, and she started at the change she saw.

Death was fast setting its seal upon him.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE OUTLAW'S LEGACY.

THE change in the dying outlaw leader was marked.

He had received a fatal wound, he knew; but he seemed strong, and his voice was by no means weak.

But he had appeared to cling hard to life until Jessie came to soothe his last hours.

Her presence was a boon to him, and it softened his nature, and he was content to let life slip from him when it would.

The day had been an exciting one to him, and then had followed a deep, calm sleep of an hour or more, and Jessie, though she felt he must go, believed he would awaken refreshed by it.

But he did awake with dissolution near.

He felt the change and called to her.

She approached and sat by his side, clasping his hand when he slipped his toward her with the low remark:

"Let me believe that it is my sister Bernice."

Then he told her in a low tone what he had made known to the Danite.

He told her more, for he gave her his name and the place where his mother then dwelt, if alive, and added:

"To-day I gave what my men believed to be my share of plunder to them to divide among themselves."

"But I was not honest with them, for I have more."

"I have, hidden away in a canyon near here, over ten thousand dollars in gold, some hundreds over."

"This money I will tell you just how to find, and I desire you, when you can, to send it to my poor old mother."

"First write to the postmaster of Frederick,

Maryland, where was my home, where she now dwells, and ask if she is alive."

"If she is, then write to her and tell her that you have this money, left to her by her son."

"You can tell a lie for a dying man, so tell her that I died in action with red-skins, for she knew that I had enlisted in the army under an assumed name."

"Tell her that I had struck it rich in the mines, and had laid up this money for her."

"She will not know how it was gained, and some of it I did dig from the mines, while the other cost human lives in the getting."

"But she, my dear old mother, must not know this."

"No, she must believe her son died an honorable man."

"Certainly she must and shall, sir, for why distress her life by a shadow of the truth," said Jessie warmly.

"You are a dear, noble girl, and God knows I pity you that your love has bound you to a man as wicked as I am."

"Ah, sir, my love misled me in the man; but he deceived me, for this man I never loved."

"No, it was his twin brother who won my heart, and this one deceived me into marrying him."

"This man, Branch Bainbridge, I hate."

"Ah! then you are not the happy wife he led me to believe you?"

"Far from it."

"Then I beg you to leave him and this wild country the moment that you can."

"Take what money you need of my legacy to my mother and use it to escape."

"But do not be hasty; think well, plan slowly, and in the end win success."

"I have determined to do so, and I will."

"And now hear me more, for I have this to say:

"Should you find that my dear old mother has passed away, I yet have a favor to ask of you."

"I certainly will do all in my power, sir, to carry out any request you may ask of me."

"I know that, I feel it."

"You have but to tell me what it is."

"You promise me?"

"I do."

"Faithfully?"

"Yes."

"To do as I, a dying man, an outlaw under Death's shadow, asks you to do, without one mental reservation?"

"Yes, if I can add one moment of peace to your last moments of life."

"Again I say that you are a noble woman."

"But let me tell you just where to find my gold."

"There, in my coat, you will find a leather wallet."

"I have it."

"Secrete it about you, for no one must know you have it."

"I will."

"You must not tell your husband or any one else."

"I understand."

"In that wallet you will find the name of my mother, my poor sister, and the place where was our home."

"Also you will find a map with full description of how to discover the gold, after you have found out where the Blue Spring Canyon is, and you will soon discover its locality from the men."

"When you have written to the postmaster and know whether my mother still lives, then you can act."

"To write to him, and receive reply, simply send your letter by Iron-Heart Dick, one of my men, for he goes to the Overland station with letters, and the address you can find with my papers."

"Write nothing you care not to be seen, for I trust no man, and Iron-Heart Dick may not be as true as I believe him, but I know of no other even to trust with mailing a letter for you and getting one."

"Now to my last request."

"If my mother is dead, then it is my wish that you spend one thousand dollars of the money, to place above her grave and that of my sister, for they will be buried side by side, a monument."

"I will gladly do so for you, and the wish reflects credit upon you."

"And the other money is to be your legacy from me."

"My legacy! oh, sir, I do not need money, and I cannot for a moment think of—"

"You gave me a pledge, and if my mother is dead, then my money goes to you."

"But let me place all in a grand monument over those who were so dear to you."

"No, if living, give all you may not need yourself to my mother; but if she be dead, then the legacy is yours—you have promised me to do as I asked."

Jessie would still have urged, but the pallor in the face deepened and she quickly stepped to the door and called Pete, who was wrapped in his blanket and asleep on a bench outside.

"Come, Pete, the end is at hand—call the captain."

Pete darted away and Jessie returned to the side of the sick man.

He had just strength to clasp her hand.

Then he tried to speak and failed, but later came the low-spoken words:

"You—have—promised!"

His eyes met hers as though beseeching a reply, and she bowed her head in response.

Then Branch Bainbridge and Doctor Drugs entered with Pete.

The doctor placed his hand upon the pulse and said:

"Your duty as nurse has ended—he is dead."

CHAPTER XLIV. FACE TO FACE.

THE evil in the nature of Branch Bainbridge had been suppressed too long to continue much longer.

This became evident as soon as Major Mephisto was laid under ground, and the Danite found himself in full command of the band of outlaws.

It did not break forth in temper against the men, but Monte, the Mexican, was very clearly given his orders, and Pete was the first object of his outbreak, for the Danite had not forgotten that the negro very nearly was successful in aiding Jessie to escape and he had never forgiven him, but was only biding his time to some day avenge himself for the wrong he considered had been done him.

The cabin of the dead chief was taken as his own, and Pete had to work like a beaver to get all in readiness, and in this Jessie aided him.

She had asked to have her own cabin back under the hillside, where she would be away from association with the outlaws, but this the chief decidedly refused and she said no more.

Pete had given the poor girl to understand that once he could aid her escape from the valley he could guide her to the Overland Trail, and thus reach safety.

But to escape from the headquarter cabin would be no easy matter, as the Danite kept a guard constantly on duty.

Then came the longing of Jessie to seek the dead outlaws' treasure, and place it where she could readily get it in case an opportunity came for escape.

The headquarters of the outlaws was in a niche of the valley, right in the towering ridge that formed one side of the vale.

It was a secure place, could be defended from the only way of approach by a few men against a regiment, and there was a retreat to the ridge if they had to fall back, and this narrow pass up the mountain two men could hold against a hundred, while the main force could escape with their plunder beyond reach.

All this did Jessie take in, and her escape seemed almost hopeless.

Yet she did not despair, and she smothered her grief at the great wrong done her by plotting and planning for the future.

The chief did not appear to watch her, and after several days she began to feel that he felt she was so safe in the camp that there was no need of it.

The negro came in for a safety-valve for him to vent his spleen on, and Pete got cursed and cuffed without mercy, and this the more urged Jessie to make her escape.

The Danite had made two trips off with his new command, and each time had successfully struck a blow, while an Overland coach and its passengers had been the sufferers.

This gave the men confidence in their new leader, and when two weeks had passed all was going on like clock-work in the Toll-Takers' camp.

Each time that the chief had gone, however, Jessie had seen that a double guard was kept about the headquarters, and one day when Pete set her dinner before her, he said:

"Missy, dere has got ter be some killin' done ef we wants ter git away."

"How, Pete?"

"Waal, missy, dere am two of dem rapscallions dere now a-watchin' us by orders."

"Now, if dey was out ob de way, why we c'd jist light out."

"But de only way is for us ter play 'possum in some way, git dem two fellers here and I'll do de killin' without no combumptions of conscience."

"It seems hard to do so, Pete."

"Dey am outlaws, missy, and it will save 'em from bein' hunged up by de neck and so do 'em a sarvice."

"Besides, missy, de chief am goin' ter kill me some day, and we must perfect ourselves."

"Alas! that is true, Pete; but do you think I could slip away now down into the Blue Canyon without being seen?"

"Don't try ter git away alone, missy, for you'll git lost, and de wild animals would eat yer up."

"No, I wish to go to the Blue Valley for a purpose, and I'll tell you all about it some day."

"Waal, missy, I'll take dem reptiles a good dinner and say you sent it to 'em, and wait dere while dey is eatin'."

"Dey won't think you is going alone, so you

kin jist slip round de rocks and run down to de Blue Canyon."

"That is the very thing, Pete."

So a good dinner was taken to the two sentinels, and when Pete departed Jessie slipped away and soon found herself in the Blue Canyon.

She had her map with her, and consulting it, was not long in finding the hidden wealth of the dead outlaw chief.

It was concealed in a crevice of the rocks, and leaves covered the spot.

There were two buckskin bags, fastened together most firmly by a wide strip of canvas, and evidently made to throw across a saddle, and so secure that they would not break open or apart.

But, try as she could, Jessie could not lift them, and so she said to herself:

"I must let Pete into the secret, for he can raise them and take them to a hiding-place which we can reach with horses when we go to escape."

"I'll come here to-morrow in broad daylight, and Pete can follow, for the chief will suspect nothing then."

That night the chief returned, and it was from his second lawless expedition.

After breakfast the next morning Jessie arranged her plans, and saying that she was going for wild-flowers she strolled away from the camps.

Pete had pretended to have a terrible sick turn that morning, so Jessie had cooked breakfast while the negro was laid up in his cabin as all supposed.

But Pete was as cunning as a fox, and after the doctor had visited him, he slipped out of the rear window of his hut, climbed the cliff unseen, and was at the Blue Canyon awaiting for Jessie when she arrived.

In a few words the young girl told him that the dead chief had left some gold, which she was to take to the outlaw's mother, and that it must be carried to a spot where, when they escaped, they could ride by and get it.

"Pete, I trust you thoroughly in this matter, and I wish to show you where it is, and then the hiding-place I have selected for it, so that you can come at night and transfer it for me."

"Yas, missy, and yer kin trust Pete with yer life and yer money."

"He'll not fail yer, 'deed he won't."

"I know that, Pete," was the answer.

Then Jessie revealed the hiding-place of the treasure, and then led the way to the spot she had selected for hiding it anew, for the Blue Canyon could not be easily entered upon horseback, and, if escaping, it would take some time to go there on foot and get it, while in the new place of concealment they could ride by and secure it with only a minute's delay.

They had reached the newly-selected spot, when suddenly before them appeared a form.

"Oh, Lordy!" broke from the negro's lips.

As for Jessie, she stood in silence facing the man.

It was Branch Bainbridge, the Danite chief.

CHAPTER XLV.

TWO SHOTS.

THE sight of the Danite chief almost unnerved Jessie for a moment, for she knew how much was at stake.

As for Pete, he was terribly alarmed, for he seemed to feel that toward him the Danite would be merciless.

But Jessie quickly rallied and stood regarding the outlaw with a look of utter defiance, while she said, with a sneer:

"Well, sir, you are dogging my steps, I see."

"Yes, my dear wife, I am, for I know that that dead outlaw left money hidden away which he did not give to his men nor tell me about."

"He seemed awful anxious to have you near him in his dying hours, and I am sure he told you where his money was in hiding."

"You are plotting to run away, and this negro is aiding you, and you wish to take this gold with you, so are searching for it."

"Am I not right?"

"Granted that you are."

"Then I am the heir of Major Mephisto, and you shall give to me that gold."

"Never, Sir Robber!"

"Jessie, I am not to be trifled with."

"You cannot frighten me, Sir Outlaw, woman though I be."

"Well, I am in deadly earnest, and as I believe the negro knows where the secret treasure is, I'll be sure that he shall not rob me of it and escape in the night."

As he spoke, the Danite quickly whipped out a revolver.

Jessie realized his purpose, and sprung before the negro to shield him.

But the Danite had touched the trigger, and with the report she fell to the ground as though shot through the heart.

A wild cry broke from Pete, now maddened beyond all fear, and he rushed upon the Danite like a tiger in his fury.

But again the revolver cracked, and poor Pete fell in his tracks.

Unheeding his last shot, the Danite sprung to the side of the woman who had been hit by the

bullet intended for Pete, and bent over her, crying out:

"Great God! what have I done?"

He saw that the bullet had cut its way just behind the temple.

But she was not dead, and raising her in his arms he sped to the cabin with her.

He ran the whole distance with his burden, fully four hundred yards, thus displaying his wonderful strength and endurance, and shouted for the outlaw surgeon as he came in sight of his cabin.

Upon the bed he placed the limp form, pointed out the wound in her head to the surgeon, for he could not speak, and then sunk down in complete exhaustion.

Doctor Drugs was a man of skill, and of prompt action.

He hastily examined the wound, sent for his case of instruments and medicines, and set to work to do all in his power for the wounded woman, who lay unconscious before him.

Not a look did he bestow upon the chief then, for he seemed to feel that what ailed him was prostration.

His case of instruments soon arrived, and he probed for the ball.

"It has glanced upon the skull, run along under the scalp and lodged in the neck at the base of the brain," he said, aloud.

"Is it fatal?" came in a hoarse whisper from the chief.

"If the bone is fractured, doubtless it is, or if it has touched the spinal column, yes."

"Do you not know?"

"I soon shall."

After some time the chief rose and stood by his side, his face white, his form in a tremor.

"Well?" he almost gasped.

"The bone is not fractured, nor is the spinal column hurt—see, here is the bullet I have taken out and it is flattened."

"Then the wound is not fatal?"

"The shock was a severe one, the wound a bad one, and inflammation of the brain may set in and carry her off."

"If not, I feel sure of saving her."

"Do so, and by Heaven, Drugs, I swear I will share half I have with you."

"Thank you, chief; but you are unnerved."

"Here, I have some good brandy in my case, and will put into a good drink some valerian for you."

"It will pull you together quickly."

The doctor did as he said and the Danite drank off the potion with gusto.

"How did it occur?" he asked.

"That infernal negro was planning to escape and I shot at him and hit her."

"But the second shot finished him."

"You killed him?" eagerly asked the doctor.

"Of course I did."

"By Jove, but I would rather it had been any man in the band than he."

"Why so, sir?" sternly asked the Danite chief.

"Because he was such a superior cook, chief—never did I see better," was the cool reply of Drugs.

The Danite chief made no reply, but watched the outlaw surgeon while he skillfully dressed the wound.

At last he asked:

"Can you not restore her to consciousness?"

"Yes, but it would be best for her not to see you, as it might excite her, until she understands that the shot was not intended for her."

"True, I will retire and leave it to you to tell her."

"I do not promise that she will return to full consciousness, for I am fearful of fever and delirium."

"But I will do all I can, chief."

"I feel that you will, Drugs, and I repeat my promise to make you rich if you do."

"Now I will leave you," and the chief turned away and left the cabin, the brandy having helped him greatly, though he still was strangely upset by what had occurred, for a man so accustomed to bloodshed as he was.

Then he called for Monte the Mexican, and ordered him to send two men down to the scene of the tragedy and bury the body of poor Pete.

In explanation, he simply said:

"I caught him aiding my wife to escape and shot at him, but hit her, as she sought to save him—my second shot killed the black traitor."

Monte made no comment, and the two men were sent to bury the negro; but they soon returned to state that *no body was to be found*.

The chief uttered an oath and hastened to the spot, but the negro was not there, neither wounded or dead.

Trailers were at once put to work to solve the mystery; but night came on and no trail could be found, nothing to show how he had gone, or when, only the red stain upon the ground where he had fallen.

CHAPTER XLVI.

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY.

POOR Jessie did not rally into consciousness, for, as Dr. Drugs had feared, fever set in, and she became delirious.

How it would end he could not tell.

The chief was nervous in the extreme, and it was set down by all to his love for her.

But his love was deep-rooted only for himself.

If Jessie died by his hand, he lost the inheritance he could otherwise have secured, as he believed, had she departed this life under different circumstances.

Then, too, the secret of the dead outlaw's treasure must be known, for he had an idea that Major Mephisto had secreted a very large sum for himself.

Jessie had most certainly foiled him there, for the wallet had been hidden, with the map of the hiding-place, in the Blue Canyon.

He could not find the treasure, try as he might.

Then the mysterious disappearance of the negro, whom he believed he had slain, worried him.

There was not a boot trail near the spot, nor any red stain leaving its mark to show where Pete had gone, or how.

Every trailer in the band had been put upon the track to solve the mystery, but after the second day it was given up as a mystery to which there was no solution.

Then the chief set out alone to try and discover what his best men had failed to do.

In the mean time the poor young wife of the Danite chief lay upon her sick-bed, carefully cared for by the outlaw surgeon, who had a tender spot in his heart after all.

It was not altogether the reward offered him by the chief that made him so devoted in his attention to the desperately-ill woman, but real pity for her.

He had sinned in the past, was a fugitive from justice, and could cut a throat with little more remorse for the act than the Danite chief would feel.

But this young and beautiful woman, so at the mercy of the brutal man who had dragged her from her home, touched the heart of the man who had become the surgeon of an outlaw band.

He, with the others of the band, believed that Jessie had felt a romantic attachment for the handsome Danite, and run off with him, hardly suspecting what her life would be.

He did not doubt but that the young wife had bitterly regretted her act, and that, fearing she might try to escape, the chief had kept a watch upon her and the negro.

The true story he did not for a moment suspect, no more than did the others of the Toll-Takers.

So it was that the surgeon devoted himself to the care of the delirious woman.

He dressed her wounds regularly and well, gave her medicine, and did all in his power to save her.

Not a soul was allowed to come near to worry her, and when the chief would urge that he should see her, he said, sternly:

"I'll not answer for the consequences if you do, chief."

"She raves in delirium, and speaks of you as a viper, so do not force your presence upon her, or it would be instantly fatal, should she recognize you."

"If you persist, then I shall leave her to your care."

The Danite uttered an oath and turned away.

Then he would again search through all of Jessie's belongings in the vain hope of finding some clew to the treasure of the dead outlaw leader.

From there he would go to the Blue Canyon and search it thoroughly, feeling sure that the treasure was hidden there.

To Monte, the Mexican, he left the care of the band, and that worthy watched his chief with seeming interest.

He had joined the band to serve his own purpose, and more, he meant to do so.

He had not forgotten that there was one at the fort some hundred miles away, whom he was plotting to make his wife.

Once he could do so, then the fortune left by his grandfather would be his, and with wealth enough to pay his debts with interest, buy off any indictments against him, and put him in possession of the grand Miranda Mansion in the city of Mexico, he could command a seeming respect at least.

And this was his determination.

To gain this, to snap his fingers at his foes, and become the envy of those who had cut him in the past, was why he had joined the band of outlaws.

With the retreat of the Toll-Takers as a refuge he could carry out his plot to see his beautiful cousin, who was the daughter of an officer at the fort.

He had visited her when she was East receiving her education, and she had refused to hear his pleadings.

He had again, years after, visited her at the fort, as a Mexican friend she had met, when her father was away.

The poor girl had been forced to receive him, for she knew him to be her cousin, and she knew that by marriage with him she would become enormously rich.

But her heart told her that Monte Miranda

was an evil man, and from Mexican papers she had seen accounts of his wild acts when he was an officer of the Lanceros, and his dismissal from that crack regiment.

So she again dismissed him, forfeiting her inheritance to get rid of him, as she had hoped, forever.

As he could not win her by fair means, he had set his heart upon doing so by foul, and while in the fort having seen material for bribery, to act as his tools, he had made up his mind to join the Toll-Takers and use them as a means to his end.

So it was that he had become an officer of the band, and he was already plotting to use the outlaws to kidnap his cousin when opportunity offered, and with the aid of those at the fort whom he had put in his pay.

Thus wrapped up in his own plans, Monte, the Mexican, cared little for what the Danite chief felt, while he had his own ideas as to the wounding of Jessie.

It was after the trailers had given up in despair the finding of the body of Pete, or what had spirited him away, that the Danite took the trail to solve the mystery in his own way, and all looked on with interest to note the result.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE DANITE CHIEF TAKES THE TRAIL OF A MYSTERY.

WHEN Branch Bainbridge undertook anything, he went at it with his whole heart and soul.

His best trailers had failed to solve the mystery of the disappearance of Pete, wounded or dead.

If dead, Pete could not have gotten away unaided.

If wounded, it could be no slight wound, for the Danite knew well his deadly aim, and he had fired for Pete's heart.

He meant to kill him at least.

He had noticed the manner in which the negro fell, and knew that he was hard hit.

So he mounted his best horse, went fully equipped with rifle, revolvers and ammunition, and prepared for a couple of days' stay if necessary.

He declined the aid of several of the trailers who wished to accompany him, preferring to go alone, and to accomplish his purpose unaided, if it was to be done.

When he returned, he hoped for some change in Jessie, and for the better, for she must not die with the secret untold of where that hidden treasure was.

The chief went to the scene of the tragedy on foot, his faithful horse following him like a dog.

He stood upon the spot where he had been when he fired the two shots.

Then he marked where Pete had fallen.

He saw signs where he had convulsively clutched at the grass in the canyon, and this showed he had not been instantly killed.

No horse could enter the Blue Canyon except from the valley, and there were no tracks there.

The canyon grew rugged as it retreated toward the ridge, and became impassable to a horse.

So the chief left his horse and went on foot.

If Pete walked away, he could go in that direction alone.

If he was aided by any of the men he would have been taken toward the valley; but if aided by an outsider, then up into the mountains he would have been carried.

He saw that there were no red stains to mark his trail; but the chief held on up to the head of the valley, up the rocky sides to the ridge above.

Then he retraced his way, mounted his horse and rode up to the head of the valley.

There stood a guard, an outpost of the band, and the Danite recognized him as one who had also tried hard to solve the mysterious disappearance of the negro.

He talked over the matter with him, got what points he could, and then held on toward where he had climbed to the ridge from the Blue Canyon.

It was nearly sunset when he reached there, but a bit of sunshine fell upon the spot and he caught sight of a track.

"It is made by a high-heel boot, not such a shoe as the negro wore," he muttered, and then he got down on hands and knees and closely examined the trail.

The nature of the ground here enabled him to follow the faint trail, the boot-heels alone showing, and thus he kept on along the ridge for half a mile when he noted some red spots upon the ground.

There was an impress as though a body had rested there.

Following it he continued on for a mile, and just as it began to grow too dark for him to see much longer he came to the tracks of a horse.

A horse had been hitched there to a tree, for the ends of several of the bushes were bitten off, and the marks of the hoofs showed that the animal had stood there a long time.

Then he took up the trail of the horse, for he saw also upon the ground other red spots that showed where the body had rested.

"He has been aided in his escape, and who could have done it but one of my men?"

"I shall follow the trail of the horse at the first glimmer of dawn, and it will lead surely to where the negro was taken, and more, it will lead on around to the valley, and I can find out which one of my men has been playing me false."

Thus mused the chief aloud, and mounting his horse he rode down the ridge to the bank of a small creek.

It was a good camping-place, and he built a fire, staked out his horse, and spread his blankets.

Then he ate his supper coolly, too well accustomed to just such a life to be disturbed by his surroundings, and soon after wrapped himself in his blankets and was fast asleep.

He had rejoiced at his success thus far, and it would prove to his men that he was the best trailer of them all, when he found the wounded negro, or his grave, and solved the mystery as to who had carried him off.

It was just dawn when he awoke.

His horse had had a good rest and feed, so he watered him at the creek, threw on the saddle and bridle, and had him ready to again take the trail.

Then he rolled up his blankets, got his breakfast from his haversack, and just as the sun was rising took the trail down once more.

It led down into the depths of a canyon, overhung with high cliffs, which were fringed with tall trees with heavy foliage.

In the early morning it was too dark to see the trail, so he came to a halt to await until the rising sun cast its light down into the gloomy canyon.

Hardly had he drawn rein when his horse neighed loudly, and instantly into sight dashed a horseman from the other side of a thicket.

Quick as a flash the Danite chief fired; but his shot was echoed by one from the horsemen, and when one man fell from his saddle, one horse dropped dead.

The gloomy canyon had become the scene of a strange meeting, and a tragedy followed.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A RESCUE.

WHEN Mortimer Bainbridge went on his way toward the retreat of the Toll-Takers, he was determined to hang about until he could capture some one of the band, and under penalty of death glean from him information which would be of value to him.

He had daringly approached very near the valley, one day, when he heard two shots ring out in rapid succession not far over a hundred paces from him.

He had left his horse back on the ridge in a thicket, and on foot had been seeking a point of lookout from whence he could see down into the valley.

The approach to this ridge was so wild and rugged that the Toll-Takers had never deemed it necessary to place an outpost in that direction.

Coming to a place from whence he could look down into the canyon, he cautiously descended until he suddenly beheld a human form lying upon the ground and writhing in seeming anguish.

That no one was with him he could see, and he knew that he must be the victim of the shots he had heard.

As he drew near he saw that the wounded man was a negro, and heard the pitiful cry:

"Oh, Lordy! oh, Lordy! he hab killed me, and I kin never save poor Missy Jessie now!"

"Oh, Lordy! oh, Lordy! hab marcy upon me a poor, sinful nigger foreber and amen."

"My man, you seem to be suffering. Let me help you."

The deep voice startled the negro, and he cried:

"Lordy! de debble am come arter my soul afore I is dead."

"No, my man, I am not the devil, but one who would help you."

Then Pete had the nerve to turn over and look up.

"Oh, Lordy! you killed me, boss, and now yer wants ter help me."

"You take me for Captain Branch the Danite, do you not?"

"Yas, boss, but yer hain't dressed like him, only yer does look his adzack image, 'fore de Lord you does."

"You are Pete?"

"Yas, boss."

"Well, I am not the Danite you serve, but one who will do all in my power to aid you. We must hasten, too, for this is not a safe place just now."

"Boss, I can't help myself much, 'cause I is dying."

"Not a bit of it, though you are badly wounded. I will carry you."

With this the ranchero raised Pete upon his shoulders with as much ease as though he were a child, and walked rapidly back up the canyon.

Up the steep ridge he went, and then halted for a rest.

"Boss, yer is stronger than Samson, my old mistis ust ter read to me about in de Bible, and I thanks yer with all my nigger soul."

"We are not safe yet, Pete," and again he raised the wounded man to his shoulders and walked rapidly on along the ridge until he again halted for a rest.

"I will leave you here and get my horse," he said, and soon after Pete found himself in the saddle, and bound there with a lariat, for he was very weak.

Then the ranchero led the horse on its way down the mountain, and did not halt for several miles, when he stopped on the banks of a swiftly flowing stream.

"Now I will see to that wound," he announced.

He stripped away the heavy woolen shirt and bared the broad black breast.

There, in the left side, was the bullet-hole, and a constant flow of crimson came from the orifice.

"Boss, is it gwine ter kill me, for I hain't fit ter die?"

"It missed your heart by an inch only, and is a serious wound, but I think and hope not fatal. I will stop the bleeding as well as I can and then take you on to where you will be comfortable and have good nursing."

"Boss, yer is too good ter me," and the eyes of Pete were dimmed by tears for the first time in many a long year.

The ranchero took from his saddle-roll some clean linen, and, saturating it in the brook, bound it upon the wound.

He now gave Pete a pull at his flask of whisky, and again placing him in the saddle, once more led his horse on toward his secret retreat.

Night came, but the ranchero held his way unerringly and at last came to a halt.

"Pete, I have had an experience that makes me distrustful of mankind, so, though I do not wish to doubt you, I am going to be on the safe side and blindfold you that you may not see where I am going to take you."

"You knows best, boss; but I hain't no mean nigger ter go back on my best friend."

The ranchero made no reply, but blindfolded the negro thoroughly, and then led his horse on once more, through the foliage screen on the cliff, down the rocky trail into the secret valley.

A call at the barrier brought Colorado Carl, who recognized the voice of the ranchero. He at once aroused Dixie and Cinthy, who were just getting ready to seek rest.

"Carl, I have got a wounded man here. We must do all in our power for him. I know only that he is Pete, the man who played the part of Lucas."

"Oh, Lord! I is goin' ter be cured ter be hanged," groaned poor Pete.

"You are mistaken, Pete; we are not your enemies, as you shall see. Now, Carl, have a bright fire built, and we will see to this wound, which he bears like the brave fellow he is. Here, Pete, are some of your own race to give you welcome," and removing the bandage from the eyes of the negro the ranchero pointed to Dixie and Cinthy, who just then came forward in great amazement at the return of their master with a prisoner, and a black one at that!

CHAPTER XLIX.

PETE'S CONFESSION.

It will be remembered that Mortimer Bainbridge was no mean surgeon, and that, when he had dressed the wound he had given Colorado Carl, in the attack upon the ranch of Colonel Noland, he had said that medicine and surgery had been a study for pleasure with him, at one time.

He had a case of instruments and another of medicine, and had fortunately brought them with him in the trail he had taken.

Cinthy got them for him as soon as the wounded Pete was laid down on blankets before the fire, and then the ranchero went to work to find the bullet.

It was no easy task, and yet Pete bore up bravely under the probe, which gave him intense pain.

At last the ball was located, and soon after was removed from the wound.

Then the wound was dressed with great care, a powder was given the patient to induce sleep, and he was made comfortable for the night, after he had taken a cup of coffee which Cinthy prepared for him.

The ranchero then had his own supper, and told Colorado Carl and the two negroes while he ate it of his adventure.

"It is a bad wound, is it not, sir?"

"It is an ugly hurt, Carl, but I do not fear that it will be fatal."

"The man has a powerful constitution, and, though he lost a great deal of blood, he is still strong and full of pluck."

"I can tell in a couple of days how it will be, and perhaps by the morning."

The next morning Pete awoke feeling very sore, but the hemorrhage had ceased from the

wound, and he was certainly not like one who had received a fatal hurt.

The ranchero and Colorado Carl watched him while he ate his breakfast, and, after dressing the wound, the former said:

"Now, Pete, I wish to say to you that we are on the trail of Captain Branch. We know that you kidnapped Miss Noland, and that you came to Santa Fé, then up to the Queen River country. In fact, I could surprise you by telling you all I know, but I do not wish you to talk much, and then only in a low tone. I will question you, and you may answer. I will do most of the talking, but I expect you to tell me the truth in all things."

"Fore de Lord I will, boss."

"I believe you, and I tax you now, as I do not care to lose time which is all-important."

"You have carried letters to Ranch Retreat to Colonel and Miss Noland, and pretended to be my man Lucas from Overlook Ranch."

"Yas, boss; and I would never have did it, had I knowed what I arterwards found out."

"Answers to those notes were given you, and you took them to my brother, Branch Bainbridge."

"Yas, boss, at de ranch of Boss Mayhew and Boss Amos, where he waited for me."

"You must not talk so much, Pete, or I will have to quit questioning you. Simply answer my questions."

"Yas, sah."

"This man, then, arranged a plot to take Miss Noland off?"

"Yas, he did; but she thought it was you, boss, as I arterwards found out, for I thought she was a-runnin' off with him on a purpose. But she called him Mortimer, and didn't know no better until I told her, and asked her ter 'scape wid me, and I'd take her to de Overland station whar she c'u'd catch de coaches east."

"It hain't no use, boss, ter tell me not to talk, for I is wound up and has got ter run down. I'll talk easy, so jist let me tell yer all I knows, and den yer kin ask what yer pleases?"

There was no use trying to check the negro, for it would only excite him, so the ranchero told him to keep cool, talk quickly, and tell all he had to say.

This Pete was only too glad to do, and he made his confession from beginning to end.

Word by word the long story came out, from the time the plot started in the elder's cabin, the marriage, the flight and the long trail, with the killing of Elder Mayhew, the going into Santa Fé, and joining of the party of Elder Sterling, whose fate in the Indian attack was also made known.

Then came the joining of the party by the Mexicans, and the decision to go to the camp of the Toll-Takers.

The getting of the Danite treasure-box and the attempt he had made to aid Jessie to escape, all was told and listened to with deepest interest.

When he was told that Jessie wished to have him remove the treasure of the dead outlaw, so as to be able to take it with them, and that the Danite chief had come upon them, the ranchero listened with the deepest attention.

Then came the story of how the Danite had fired at him, and Jessie had tried to protect him and had been shot. The face of the ranchero became fearful in its expression of suppressed fury at this recitation, and he asked in a voice that quivered with anger:

"Was that shot fatal?"

"The Lord only knows, boss, but I doesn't think so, sah, for the chief he went off wid her to the cabin."

"I was so hurt I didn't know much; but I run up on him ter kill him for shootin' poor missy, and then he shot me."

"Oh, boss, it were awful, and but fer you I'd been a dead nigger this blessed minute, for they would have kilt me, sah, so they would."

"Pete, you are not a bad man at heart, and I am your friend you may rest assured. I came upon this trail to follow it to the end and I will do it, and now I wish to get from you all the points I can about the Toll-Takers' camp, for I shall go in there by night and discover if Miss Noland is dead or alive."

"If not much injured, I shall rescue her, and if she has been killed, then I shall seek a revenge that I swear to you shall be terrible."

"Now, tell me, Pete, all about the force, the camps, and all else you can think of. Then you must rest, and I hope your long talk will do you no harm."

"Dixie and Cinthy, here, will take good care of you. Mr. Carl is as good a surgeon as I am, so you will not fare badly."

"Lordy, boss, I knows dat, sah, for dis is like de old home, sah, in Caroliny."

Seeing that the negro was becoming excited, the ranchero gave him an anodyne to quiet him, and then went off with Colorado Carl for a long talk.

The result of this conference was that Bainbridge left Pete to the care of Colorado Carl and the faithful negroes, and mounting his horse late in the evening started off again on the trail.

He camped half a dozen miles from the valley, which he was approaching as before by the

way of the ridge, and had just started on again in the early dawn when he saw a horseman come into view.

He at once suspected that the outlaws were upon his trail, which he had taken when carrying the wounded negro, and so drew his revolver to be ready to meet what was before him.

Then came the flash of the horseman's revolver, and his weapon answered the shot a second after, as his horse was sinking beneath him with a bullet in his brain.

CHAPTER L.

A FATAL SHOT.

WHEN his horse fell beneath him, stone-dead, the Texan ranchero caught upon his feet.

He had fired quickly, for he had meant to challenge the horseman before shooting, but the other had given him no chance to do this, and so he had followed his shot in a second by one from his own revolver.

As he lighted upon his feet, he sprung at once forward toward his foe. He did not doubt his aim; he was sure his bullet had gone true, yet it might not have been fatal.

As the horse moved away, the ranchero beheld the rider lying upon the ground. He was groaning in seeming physical and mental anguish combined. His revolver lay near his nerveless hand, and it was evident that the man had but a few minutes to live.

The light of the sun suddenly broke through the foliage-clad cliff and shone directly into the dark canyon, and a cry broke from the lips of Mortimer Bainbridge, and with a mighty leap he sprung to the side of the fallen man.

"Branch Bainbridge, my hand has saved you from the gallows--a brother's hand has taken your life."

A groan broke from the lips of the dying Danite, and he turned his gaze full upon his brother.

He tried to rise, then sought to grasp his revolver, but his hands would not obey his bidding.

"Curse you, Mortimer, you have killed me!"

"Yes, though I knew not it was you when you fired first upon me."

"I intended to take you alive, Branch, and turn you over to the Government to hang. That was to be my revenge, to see you die by the rope."

"I had lost all feeling of kindred, all pity, and had become merciless toward you, intending to shadow you to the gallows; but it is better so, perhaps, that I save the neck of my mother's son, my own twin-brother, from such an end, by killing him with my own hand."

"Branch, you are a dying man."

Again the eyes slowly opened and met those of the ranchero.

"I know that I cannot live, and I say, curse you, Mortimer Bainbridge, for taking my life!"

"Have you only curses to utter now, in this awful moment?"

"Yes, only curses upon you."

"You have no remorse for the past, no regret?"

"None."

"My God, what a heart of stone you have."

"And I have no hope for the future," was the grim rejoinder.

"Good God! how can you expect hope when you have lived the life of red-handed crime you have?"

"So be it, Mortimer. You shall not see me cower now when death has me in his cruel grasp."

"One question answer me."

"Well?"

"Where is the poor girl you robbed me of?"

"Dying, or perhaps dead; so I cheat you in the end."

"You killed her."

"How know you that?"

"I know more than you think, for I have shadowed you from Overlook Ranch to this spot."

"Well, you can shadow me no longer, for I—"

His face became suddenly of a deathly hue, his teeth came together with a force that seemed to break them, and with a deep-drawn sigh he expired.

The ranchero had knelt by his side as he saw the death-agony overwhelm him so suddenly and check his speech.

It was with an effort that he forced himself to grasp the hand of his brother, and then said, earnestly:

"Branch, dying as you are, know that I forgive you."

The eyes of the dying man met those of the speaker and held them for an instant.

In that last look, his last glimpse of earth, was there a realization of the wrong he had done the noble man who could again forgive?

It is to be hoped that there was; Mortimer seemed to feel that there was, and that the pressure of the hand was intended to have him feel that his heart had softened at last.

The Texan's head was bowed as he knelt there, and from his heart came an unspoken prayer for the rest of the guilty soul.

Then his hand rested upon the forehead of the dead outlaw, and he said, firmly:

"My brother, now, for death evens all."

Rising, he turned toward the horse of the outlaw which was feeding near, and readily caught him.

The saddle and bridle were taken from the body of his own horse and fastened upon the splendid animal the Danite had ridden.

Next, he raised the fast-stiffening form, and, placing it across the saddle, secured it with a lariat, and with the bridle-rein in hand led the animal back upon the trail he had been coming when the Danite came in sight.

He was not many miles from the secret retreat, and when he entered the little valley Colorado Carl sprung to his side, crying:

"Great God! it is the Danite chief."

"Yes."

"And dead?"

"Yes, we met in the dusk of early morn. He opened fire, killed my horse, and I responded, to find that I had slain my own brother."

"After we have buried him I shall take his clothes and horse and go to the retreat of the Toll-Takers."

"Ah, chief, I know what you would do?"

"Yes, I shall personate my brother, and go as the Danite, the chief of the outlaws."

"How fearful the risk."

"I will take it," was the solemn reply, and Carl knew that to argue against it was useless.

The body of the dead outlaw was buried in a pretty nook in the little valley, and then the ranchero retired to his shelter for rest.

He awoke for dinner, had a talk with Pete who was no worse, and, changing his clothes for those taken from the dead Danite, mounted his horse, and with a request to Carl to come to a certain rendezvous in two days, he rode away to play the dangerous part of an outlaw chief.

CHAPTER LI.

IN THE TOLL-TAKERS' CAMP.

A KNOWLEDGE of every little detail of just how Branch Bainbridge had acted in the Toll-Takers' camp, his conduct to his men and the situation of the cabin, the ranchero had obtained from Pete.

The negro, knowing his bold determination, was anxious to put him upon his guard against any mischance, any slip that he might make of action or speech.

The Danite chief had not shown the "cloven foot" yet in the camp, so that he was popular with his men, and this Pete made known.

The name of the Mexican lieutenant, Monte, of the outlaw surgeon and all, Pete told, so that the Texan went toward the Retreat fully equipped against detection, attired in his brother's clothing, riding his horse, saddled and bridled as he had ridden away from the camp to solve the mystery of Pete's disappearance.

Even his weapons he carried, and yet he had hidden away about him a pair of his own, which he knew he could depend on fully.

He had appointed a spot upon the ridge, which he fully described to Colorado Carl, where a letter could be left, and every other day the detective was to ride there and leave a note of how matters went at the Retreat and see if any communication was there for him.

It was the afternoon of the third day after the departure of the Danite chief on the trail of the mystery that the outlaw chief was seated out in front of Jessie's cabin enjoying his pipe.

The men had begun to dread harm to their chief, as they supposed he would be unable to find any trail from where Pete's body had been lying and soon return.

Out of his own quarters came Lieutenant Monte, and approaching the outlaw surgeon, said:

"I say, Doctor Drugs, what do you think about this staying away of the chief?"

"He has doubtless found some trail the men could not discover, and is following it."

"I have a fear that he has met with harm."

"If he does not turn up, it leaves you chief, Señor Monte."

"A position I do not crave, though I will not shrink from it."

"If Captain Branch does not return to-night, I shall start on the search for him to-morrow."

"It might be well to do so."

"Now tell me just how the fair Jessie is."

"You refer to Mrs. Branch, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, as you understand," hotly said Monte.

"I had never heard her spoken of before by the name you gave her, Señor Monte."

"Well, you know now that her name is Jessie, and I wish to ask you to tell me just how she is."

"The wound is not a fatal one and will readily heal, leaving but a tiny scar; but she has brain fever, superinduced by the shock, and is delirious."

"But you hope that she may recover?"

"I hope so, and believe that she will; but the critical period has not yet passed."

"You have been a most devoted nurse to her, I must say."

"A man would be a brute not to be to one in her unfortunate situation."

"See here, Drugs?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Monte."

"If the chief does not return, what is to be done with her?"

"I do not know, but no harm shall befall her."

"Well, it will be best if she dies, and you will do her a service if you allow her to do so, poor woman."

"I shall do all in my power to save her, sir, and if I do so, and she thinks it best to end her life of sorrow and pain, she can easily get rid of her existence by taking poison."

The young Mexican gazed sharply at the doctor, and then said:

"Do you know that I believe that woman would claim the right to rule this band, should Captain Branch not return?"

"If she recovers."

"Of course."

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, she is no ordinary woman. She is well accustomed to life on the plains, and is an expert shot and horsewoman, and fears nothing. She has nerve a man might be proud of, and she feels, I believe, that she cannot return to her home."

"Because she ran off with an outlaw?"

"Well, from all I understand about it, she did that unknowingly; still, she feels that she has disgraced herself and her name, and may take a notion to step into the chief's place, should he not return."

"Why do you think so?"

"Merely from what I know of her, and from what that negro Pete told me."

"Do you think his idea was that she wished to remain here, when the chief thought she would escape?"

"Well, yes; he told me that he thought she wished to stay and not leave, and that she was going to ask to be an officer."

"No?"

"Yes, and he wished me to hint to the chief that his wife was too well satisfied with her surroundings to desire to escape."

The surgeon laughed.

"You seem amused?"

"I am."

"Pray tell me why?"

"Well, that negro was as keen as a razor, and was simply preparing the way to aid her to escape and go with her."

"You think so?"

"If not, why were they in the Blue Canyon when the negro was pretending to be very sick, and why did the chief shoot his wife?"

"Do you think he did so purposely, Drugs?"

"I do not know what to think about that; but I am sure they were hiding something away there, preparatory to making their escape."

"It may be so; but why should the chief shoot her, and then bring her to the cabin?"

"It may have been done in temper, and then he quickly regretted his act; and perhaps from another reason."

"Name it."

"He is a new man with the band, and to kill his wife might cause him trouble. They are outlaws, true, but there is some feeling left yet within them that would cause them to refuse the leadership of a man who would take the life of his young and beautiful wife," and the doctor shuddered at the remembrance of his own deed in the past.

"Well, it may be as you suggest; but, pray tell me what became of Pete?"

"Why, what could become of him except one thing, lieutenant?"

"And what is that?"

"He escaped."

"Escaped?"

"Why, certainly."

"But the chief killed him."

"So he said."

"You do not believe it?"

"Where is the body?"

"True."

"My idea is that he was not killed, though the chief may have shot at him, and even wounded him; but that Pete escaped him there is no doubt. He must have been only slightly wounded and so have gotten away."

"Well?"

"The chief may have, in shooting at the negro, hit his wife by accident, and then, seeing that she yet lived, he had taken her in his arms and run to the cabin with her. He was dead beat when he came in and could not utter a word."

"When he recovered he did not, for a long time, send any one after the negro, and this looked as though he wished he might escape, he having failed to silence him by killing him on the spot."

"Then the chief started upon the trail himself, so my idea is that Pete just made tracks for the nearest Overland station and is safe—Ah! there comes the chief now," and Doctor Drugs pointed down the valley where a horseman was seen coming slowly up the trail leading to the outlaw headquarters.

CHAPTER LII.

THE COUNTERFEIT CHIEF.

IT WAS just noon when the Texan ranchero rode into the view of the outlaw outpost at the head of the valley.

The sentinel saluted him, and said:

"Did you find any trace of the nigger Pete, cap'n?"

"Yes, he has escaped," was the cool reply, and the ranchero asked:

"Does all go on well in the camps?"

"Yes, cap'n, or did when I left this morning to come on duty, only the boys were gittin' a bit anxious about your long stay."

"I am all right; but how is the—my wife?" and there was a world of meaning in the question.

"She's got fever yet, sir, but I think old Doctor Drugs is of opinion she'll pull through all right."

"Thank you," and the ranchero rode on.

His heart gave a bound of joy at the news about Jessie, and he had a new incentive to go forward.

He had passed the ordeal of the outpost without a hitch, and it gave him hope for the future.

His keen eyes took in everything in sight, the valley and all its surroundings.

A number of horses were feeding on some meadow land near the stream, and a herder lay under a tree watching them and reading.

Soon he came in sight of the glen in which stood the headquarter cabins, and he turned into the trail leading to them, allowing his horse to take the way as he had done in going to the outposts.

As he approached the cabins, he saw all was as it had been described to him by Pete.

The doctor and the Mexican arose as he approached, and from Pete's description he knew them both.

"Welcome back, chief. You have saved me from going in search of you as I had intended doing to-morrow," called out the Mexican.

"You were very kind, Señor Monte; but I am all right, you see."

"Now, doctor, how is—my wife?"

"Just a trifle better, sir, for as she is no worse I consider it a good sign."

"Yes, but you must be broken down with nursing."

"I can stand it, chief; but did you find any trace of the darky?"

"Yes, I only wounded him, it seems, so he played 'possum, pretended to be dead and made his escape."

"That is bad, for he can guide the soldiers here upon us," Monte remarked.

"I said that he made his escape, the other day."

"Ah! you have seen him then, chief?"

"Yes, Monte, and he is safe now, and will lead no soldiers against me."

The lieutenant and Doctor Drugs looked at each other significantly.

The words of the chief seemed ominous for poor Pete, for they implied that he was beyond doing any harm.

The chief had, in their minds, done what the men could not do, follow the trail of the negro, and coming up with him had killed him.

Then the counterfeit chief remarked:

"Doctor, I came upon a party that have lately been in hard luck, and as there was nothing to make out of them I played honest, of course. They had been reduced to two white men and a negro man and his wife."

"I advised the white men to go to the fort and seek aid to get back to their homes, telling them that I would take charge of the two negroes."

"Good! Now we'll have something fit to eat, for I never saw a darky yet that wasn't a natural-born cook, and I have mourned for Pete as I would for a brother—on that account only," said the doctor.

"Well, Drugs, I tried the cooking of the negress, and it is excellent, and more, they will be most valuable to us."

"The woman can look after my poor wife, and the man will be invaluable."

"But where are they?"

"I left them in camp and shall return for them to-morrow, for the white men will leave then on their way to the fort."

"They believe me a settler of course."

"I am delighted, chief. It is better than if you had gotten all the gold the whites had," averred the doctor.

"I thought so," dryly returned the ranchero, and turning to the Mexican he asked:

"Is all going well in the camps, Monte?"

"Yes, chief."

"And your wounded man, Drugs?"

"Improving, sir, and I'll not lose a case."

The Texan now gave his horse to a man who came forward to take him, and walked leisurely toward the cabin which Pete had told him the chief had occupied, for Bainbridge saw at a glance that the one where Dr. Drugs sat with the lieutenant was not his brother's, to which poor Jessie had been taken.

Entering the cabin, he saw about him many things to remind him of his brother, and which the Danite had taken with him from Overlook Ranch.

He longed to see Jessie, and yet dared not trust himself at that moment.

He must have a talk with Drugs, and learn her exact condition.

With his knowledge of surgery and medicine, he would understand her chances of recovery as soon as he knew just how she had been wounded and what her pulse and temperature counted.

Many of her things he saw about the cabin, and his heart was wrung with anguish at her position and sorrows, which he knew must have been terrible.

It had been a bright thought of his, the story he had told about meeting the remnants of an emigrant party, and that he had decided to take the two negroes in his care.

This would give Jessie a devoted nurse in Cinthy, and Dixie would prove a most valuable friend to him in the Toll-Takers' camp.

So he would lose no time in getting them there; and more—they must be trained to act a part of horror and alarm when discovering that they had been inveigled into an outlaw band's retreat.

The Texan had already decided upon his course, for, whether Jessie lived or died, he would utterly wipe out the outlaw band of Toll-Takers.

And better still, he had determined upon his manner of doing so.

After an hour spent in the cabin he sought the doctor, and found him at his post of duty, the cabin of the suffering invalid.

He asked to see Jessie, and Dr. Drugs said he might do so, as she was unconscious.

He almost staggered under the shock at beholding her, so greatly had she changed. Her beautiful hair was gone, for the doctor had sheared it, close to her head.

Her forehead was bandaged, and flushed with high fever and she was breathing heavily. She certainly looked like one hovering on the verge of the grave.

"Tell me again, doctor, all about the wound, and what you have done?" he commanded gently, and the surgeon did so.

"Drugs, you are breaking yourself down, so I will go at once for those negroes. Explain my absence to Monte, should he ask," and the ranchero, ordering a fresh horse, rode out of the valley on his mission.

He halted at sunset at a place that gave him a good view back over his trail, and watched to see if he was followed.

Finding at dark that he was not, he rode on rapidly and arrived at the secret retreat to find all asleep; but his call awakened them. He quickly told of his adventure and then made known to the negroes what he had said about them, adding:

"Now, Cinthy, I wish you and Dixie to go with me. You must play your parts well when discovering that you are in an outlaw camp. Miss Jessie needs you, Cinthy, and you shall never regret going to her, I promise you, and I require Dixie's aid."

"Lor', Mars' Mort, I'll go to the debble wid you," declared Cinthy, and in this startling decision of his wife Dixie coincided.

"But, remember, I am to be 'Boss' now, not Mars' Mort?"

"Yas, sah."

"And, Carl, I wish you to remain here and brace up poor Pete. I'll tell you, while Dixie and Cinthy get ready, just what my plan is to run down these outlaws to the last one, without aid from outside, and you can help me ever so much, while Pete, when he gets on his legs again will be your right bower."

"I am ready, chief, and Pete will pull through all right."

The ranchero now made known his plans, and soon after midnight rode away, accompanied by Dixie and Cinthy, and a pack-horse loaded with their belongings.

It was just dawn when they reached the valley outpost, and passed on into the mountain stronghold of the Toll-Takers of the Trail.

The eyes of Dixie and Cinthy were like saucers in their wonderment, but there was no backing down from the peril they had to face, and they followed the pretended outlaw chief with a confidence in him that nothing could shake.

CHAPTER LIII.

UNKNOWN DETECTIVES.

WEEKS passed after the arrival of the ranchero and the two negroes in the outlaw camp. A change had come for the better in Jessie's condition.

The pretended chief had pleaded so that the outlaw doctor had allowed him to also aid as Jessie's nurse, and the care which Cinthy had given, Drugs was good enough to say, had really saved her life.

Under the excuse of wishing to have his men fully recover from their recent defeat and disaster, the chief had kept them in camp as long as he could, and when he had allowed them to again go upon raids, it was under the command of his lieutenant, Monte, the Mexican, who was also planning snares for his own ends.

In his rides alone, the chief had left letters for, and received them from, Colorado Carl, and when Pete was able to be left alone, Buffalo Bill's Ally had gone off on a mission for several days.

What this mission was will appear later, but Colorado Carl seemed to be wholly satisfied with what he had accomplished by going.

Several of these trips he afterward made, and thus over a month had gone by.

Doctor Drugs had reported Jessie out of danger, and in all of her delirium she had seemed to know of the presence of the chief, and had called him Mortimer.

One day she was seated alone in a chair which the chief had made for her, and Cinthy was present.

Monte was off on a raid with the men, the doctor was hunting game, and Dixie was busy about the camp.

Suddenly the chief entered, and, after greeting Jessie, gently told Cinthy that he would remain with the invalid.

"Oh, Branch, why could you not have been the noble man your poor wronged brother is?"

"I have watched you in all your noble devotion to me, and wondered how two men who were exact counterparts in face, form and voice could have hearts and natures as different as Heaven and hell. I have been near to death, and I only wish I might have died."

"Jessie, I have something to tell you, and I believe you are well enough to hear it now."

"Not a soul is near to hear what I have to tell you. It will amaze you and give you pleasure, I know."

"Don't ask any questions, but let me tell you that I know how Mortimer has trailed you from the very door of Ranch Retreat to this place."

"Nay, don't speak, but listen, and I will tell you of his whole journey. If you interrupt me by a single question, I will feel that you are not well enough to hear all, so will stop."

"I am well enough; I can hear all; tell me everything," she pleaded.

Then began the ranchero's story of going to Mexico, what he learned there and did, and how he discovered Jessie gone upon his return. Nothing was left untold; the shadowing of the fugitives on the long trail was pictured fully.

"It is so kind of you to tell me all this; but, how do you know about it?"

"You shall know all," was the answer.

And then came the story of the finding of the secret retreat, the hearing by Mortimer Bainbridge of the two shots which had wounded her and Pete, and how Pete had been saved.

"Branch Bainbridge, you are a repentant man to tell all this. You have been smitten with remorse and wish to atone. You have seen your brother Mortimer!"

"Do not get excited, Jessie, or I will have nothing more to say."

"I am perfectly calm."

Then came the climax of the revelation, of the meeting of the two brothers in the dusky canyon and the fatal shot, ending with the thrilling words:

"Jessie, Branch Bainbridge impersonated me, and I now am impersonating him."

"I am Mortimer Bainbridge—now your brother and protector; I am here to save you."

Jessie in vain tried to speak. It was not from alarm, but joy inexpressible, and she dropped her head into her hands and burst into tears.

Not a word did Mortimer Bainbridge say to check the flow of feeling, until at last she raised her head, and extending her hand, said softly:

"Noble Mortimer! You are just as I knew you to be."

"We have both suffered, oh, how terribly words can never tell; but the clouds have a silver lining now."

"Yes, you are indeed my brother, Mortimer."

"I have more to tell you when you are able to listen."

"I can hear all now."

"I have written to your father, telling him that you are safe, and Colorado Carl mailed the letter at the fort. I told him not to expect you home soon, however, and that you would write before long. I also wrote to Buckskin Sam, who has charge of my ranch, telling him I had found you, but would yet be absent for some time."

"Now, Jessie, I have entered into a plot to catch every outlaw in these mountains, as well as in this band. I am aided by Colorado Carl and Pete, the former being in Salt Lake City as a detective, and the latter at the Overland station where he can act as a spy for me."

"Through Carl I have secured half a dozen other good men as detectives, several of them being Indians, and stationed them in the mining-camps."

"This man Monte is playing a deep game, and I shall keep him well watched, I promise you, while both Dixie and Cinthy are my spies here."

"You, Jessie, I also now wish to aid me."

"All in my power, Mortimer."

"It will be necessary for me to go and dwell in the principal mining-camp in these mountains, known as Hallelujah City. I will be an Unknown there, dressing in black and doing all my work in a mysterious manner. It will not do for me to lead these outlaws on a raid, so I will leave that to Monte."

"You can watch him, keep him straight, and

you must, through a seeming decoy for the Toll-Takers, secretly warn emigrant-trains, Overland coaches and others in danger.

"You might make your movements mysterious, and be only seen in deep black."

"I have the plan thoroughly laid out, and in time will know every fugitive from justice on the border, and have traps all set to catch them, and I know that you can do much to help me."

"And will gladly do so, Mortimer."

"Then it is arranged, and you are now my fair detective, the Woman in Black."

CHAPTER LIV.

CONCLUSION.

As the story of the fair detective, Jessie, has been told in the romance "The Three Bills: Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill, and Bantbox Bill," I need not touch upon the mysterious and valuable services rendered by the "Woman in Black," nor refer to the life of Mortimer Bainbridge in Hallelujah City mining-camp, when he was known as the "Bravo in Broadcloth," and "Bantbox Bill," or, "Man of Many Mysteries."

Enough now to repeat that Mortimer Bainbridge, aided by Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Frank Powell and other heroes of the border, and his own unknown detectives, accomplished all that he set out to do, and returned to the prairies of Texas, accompanied by Jessie, Colorado Carl, Dixie, Cinthy and Pete, and that the heart of old Colonel Noland was rejoiced at the restoration of his daughter.

I must also add that Jessie faithfully carried out her pledge to the dead outlaw chief, Major Mephisto, and gave to his mother the legacy he had left.

Shall I not confess that Jessie no longer claimed the gallant Texan ranchero, after her return to Texas, as a brother? and that, instead, she called him husband?

THE END.

Dick Darling, Pony Express Rider.

CHAPTER I.

"MARSE DICK, I tells you dat dis yer' won't do. Hyar we is all alone in de perarer; and ef dem painted debbles comes arter us, whar is we? Why, nowhar."

And Tom Nelson rolled the whites of his eyes in all directions.

Dick Darling laughed. He was a young fellow, between twenty and thirty years of age, and he had known and escaped so many dangers that he had become somewhat reckless. Dick had been one of the first, in fact, the very first man that ever rode on the Overland Pony Express, years before the Pacific Railroad was thought of. He was now traveling on the borders of Oregon, looking for a location to settle on within a few miles of the Klamath and Modoc reservations, and with a secret object in his mind, which will develop itself in due time.

"Never mind, Tom," he said, carelessly. "The Indians 'round here are all quiet on their reservations, and I wouldn't care if we were to meet a whole tribe. If they come after us we can run. If we want to find them, we always have Hector, and he's a better trailer than any brave on the plains."

"Yas, Marse Dick," said the negro, dubiously; "but how is I to run wid dis ole mule? He's jes' as slow as he can be, and Hector—"

The conference was broken off by a low, uneasy whine from a large hound which was loping along close to the riders.

"Dar, didn't I tole you so, Marse Dick? Tom's a gone nigger dis bressed day. Dem's 'Injuns!"

Dick Darling swung his rifle 'round from his back and caught it under his right arm before he answered. Then he quietly observed:

"You're right, Tom; they're Indians. Turn your mule and ride toward Fairfield's ranch. I'll take care of you. Tell Miss Charlotte—I mean, tell the Fairfields that I shall be there by sunset unless I lose my hair which I don't think likely."

He had hardly finished speaking when over a swell of the prairie rode a plumed Indian, in full war costume, followed by at least a dozen warriors. For the first time Dick Darling looked grave; his keen and practiced eyes recognized them as Modoc braves; and they were all in war-paint.

"Away, Tom, and God speed you," was the young man's exhortation. Then setting spurs to his horse, he galloped straight toward the war-party, while the negro trotted away to the southwest.

Dick Darling, one against a dozen, was galloping off at a right angle to his own course, pursued by all the Modocs with loud yells.

Tom pursued his way in peace; and about four in the afternoon uttered a cry of joy. Fairfield's ranch, a small, neat dwelling in the midst of a stockade of great strength, stood before him. The happy ducky galloped up to the gate of the stockade, yelling:

"Marse Fairfield, save yourself. De Injuns is up, and dem's done gone scalp Marse Dick Darling, and he sends de news dat he's comin' hyar at sunset if he hab any ha'r left."

He had hardly ended his speech when the face of a beautiful girl appeared at the wicket of the stockade, and a sweet voice said:

"Dick Darling scalped? I'll never believe that till I see his body. Why, I'd trust Dick to whip a whole war-party. You're afraid, that's all that ails you. Come in and see if you can tell a straight story."

And the gate flew open, revealing a tall, magnificently-formed girl, who beckoned the negro in, as if she had been used to war all her life.

Somewhat abashed, Tom dismounted and entered, muttering:

"Dar ar' Missy Charlotte, Marse Dick's gal. Ain't she lubly, jist?"

A few minutes later the darky was in the stockade with his mule and dog, while old Fairfield, with his two beautiful daughters, Charlotte and Sophy, cross-questioned him strictly on the events of the morning.

When he had finished, all looked grave except Charlotte, who said, firmly:

"He promised to come here this evening, and come he will. I know Dick."

In the hot noon of the prairies, a young man, with a Spencer rifle in his hand, was riding leisurely toward Fairfield's ranche, followed by five Indians. Every now and then one of them fired a shot; but it seemed indeed as if Dick Darling bore a charmed life. Not a bullet struck him for some time, and he rode on as if disdaining to reply. The Modocs seemed to be afraid to close with him, as well they might. Seven of their war-party had already bitten the dust, killed by Dick.

At last the chief took a long and steady aim, halting his horse to fire, and to his great joy the quondam express-rider dropped from his saddle to the ground.

With loud yells of triumph the Indians galloped up, only to meet a terrible transformation. Leaping to his feet, unhurt, Dick leveled his repeater across his horse's back, and fired five shots in rapid succession. Three Indians fell, and the remaining couple, thoroughly demoralized, fled in confusion. The daring hunter uttered a triumphant laugh and remounted his horse. He panted a little and pressed his hand to his side as if in pain, but that was all the token that the bullet had hurt him.

"By Jove!" he soliloquized, as he rode toward Fairfield's ranche, "that little investment of mine has been well worth the thousand dollars it cost me. But that last bullet tried the mail. It was a fair knock-down."

The secret of his invulnerability among the Indians was very simple. Dick wore a shirt of mail, light and flexible, but perfectly bullet-proof. It had cost him a thousand dollars, but it was well worth the money, as long as he kept the secret to himself.

Just about sunset, Darling rode leisurely up to Fairfield's ranche gate, and the first face he saw was that of Charlotte Fairfield.

"I knew the Modocs could never kill my Dick," was all she said.

And thus began the Modoc war.

CHAPTER II.

THE Modocs were up, and all Northern California was in a fever of excitement. Volunteers were hurrying to Yreka in hot haste; the troops were being concentrated around the celebrated retreats, known as the "Lava Beds;" scouts were galloping to and fro in the country, and every one was anxious and disquieted about the prospects of a general Indian war.

In the midst of all these difficulties came another, as great as any. Besides the insurrection of the Modocs, it was certain that their next neighbors, the Klamaths, were unruly and disposed to give trouble. Two mail-carriers, in succession, disappeared; and it became necessary to find a volunteer, to continue the indispensable but dangerous duty.

It was during this time of uncertainty, so well remembered by our citizens, that the good people of Yreka were surprised, one morning, to see a nattily-dressed young fellow ride

through the streets to the head-quarters of the commanding officer, and to hear that the renowned Dick Darling, the first man who ever rode a pony express, had offered to carry the mails to and from the Lava Beds, single-handed.

His offer was of course instantly accepted, and he departed immediately. Within an hour after, a second visitor disturbed the equanimity of the town. He came in the person of an innocent-looking negro, none other than our old friend, Tom Nelson, well mounted and armed, and followed by Dick Darling's splendid hound, Hector.

"Please, marse capten-colonel," said Tom, when he was introduced to the commander of the district, "I've come to see ef I couldn't help de sogers, nohow. I've ole hunter, I is, and I've tuk many an Injun scalp, when I war down in Texas wid de ole Ninth cavalry. You gibbs me twenty dollar fur ebbery scalp, boss, an' I gets you a hull basket full."

"Get out of here, you black rascal," said the pompous commander, in great scorn. "Do you suppose that the United States can't take fifty red vagabonds without paying scalp bounties? Be off with you."

Tom drew himself up with native dignity, and cuttingly observed:

"Tain't b'en looking much like takin' dem, marse colonel, when dey kills ten sogers for one squaw. I offers my sarvices. Will you hab dem?"

"No!" thundered the commander, half angry, half amused at the darky's offer.

Tom made a stiff salute, wheeled round and marched out, muttering:

"Needn't be so huffy, noway; don't want to steal nuffin'."

He climbed into his saddle, and rode out of the town in high dudgeon, resolved, as he expressed it, "to have a scout on his own hook, anyway."

It took but a short time for him to be clear of the town; and then, when shut out by an intervening swell, he seemed to be as much alone as if in the midst of the desert.

Tom Nelson had not obtained horse and arms, had not come all this way from Fairfield's ranche, without an object. What that object was, will be explained by a few words that fell from the lips of Charlotte Fairfield, the day before, when Dick Darling rode away to Yreka from the ranche, announcing his intention of volunteering as mail-carrier.

"Tom," she said to the negro, "there is something tells me that Dick is going to a greater peril than he has ever yet run. Are you brave?"

"Try me, missy," was the laconic reply.

"Take my horse, and one of my father's rifles, then," she said, "and follow Dick. Whatever happens to him, do you be near him; and let no harm come to him. Bring him back safe, Tom, and I'll give you free quarters in our house for life."

And Charlotte blushed, for it was currently reported that she and Dick were to be married, as soon as the latter had settled his "claim."

Tom accepted the offer with eagerness. Mounted and armed, he was a very different man from Tom on a slow mule, without a weapon. Followed by the hound Hector, which he trusted implicitly, while Darling considered the dog an incumbrance in active service, he set forth, and presented himself at Yreka, as we have seen. The fact was that Tom, while anxious to serve his patroness, was equally anxious to turn an honest penny; and he had heard from all the citizens round that a bounty was offered on Modoc scalps. His reception by Col. W—— had undeceived him, and he resolved to "stick to business, and bring back Marse Dick."

For some time Tom rode north from Yreka toward the Lava Beds in a very leisurely manner, making frequent excursions to the right and left, and hunting for Darling's trail. On the hard ground of the prairie he might never have found it, had it not been for the assistance of the hound. Hector suddenly uttered a low yelp of joy, and set off at a swinging

gallop, with his nose to the ground, following the trail which his keen scent recognized as that of his master.

"Good hound, good ole Hec!" cried Tom, delighted. "Who says dat we can't track like all creation?"

And away galloped the darky after the dog, at a round rate of speed, the track of horses' feet appearing at intervals, the sagacious dog running steadily along, the scent "lying well," to use a phrase culled from the language of the prairie.

After nearly an hour of this sort of work, Hector made a dead stop; and appeared puzzled.

Then he ran slowly and hesitatingly along for some paces, and at last paused, threw up his head, and gave utterance to a long and mournful howl.

"Gorra mighty, wurra dat?" exclaimed Tom, as he looked down to find the cause of the dog's behavior.

To his surprise, appeared nothing singular. The hoof-tracks had vanished, or were so faint as to be scarcely discernible; yet it was evident that the hound could not have lost the scent. In fact, he had not. As if he had relieved his feelings by that howl, he set off on the track once more, and speedily put another mile between himself and Yreka.

Tom noticed, however, that he ran slowly and seemed uneasy. Every now and then he would half stop, turn his head to windward, and utter a low wail, till at last, as a puff of wind came from the north-east, Hector again stopped, threw up his head, and howled once more.

"Dat dog's got mo' sense dan half de Chris-sens," soliloquized Tom, scratching his head. "Whaf for he do dat, I've wonnerin'."

Then, as a sudden idea struck him, he cried:

"Why, Tom Nelson, ef you isn't a foolish nigger! You so anxious to catch Marse Dick you forget whaf you is. Dem's Injuns, and de dog smell 'um. He nebber act dat way widout dey was around."

The negro halted and cogitated. Then, taking a sudden resolution, he called the dog off the track, and spoke to him.

"Find de Injuns, good Hec, find dem; and we'se spoil deir leetle game. Dey's arter Marse Dick, jess so sho' as eggs is eggs."

The hound, with wonderful sagacity, appeared to understand the reason of the change of route; for he galloped off to windward, his head well up, no longer whining or baying, but "running mute." It was plain from his actions that the Indians could not be far off. Tom brought his rifle to the front in readiness and followed at a canter. As he topped the next swell, he came in sight of a scene that repaid him for his change of course. He had, indeed, arrived in the nick of time.

Not a mile off the rugged edges of the famous Lava Beds could be seen indenting the edge of the prairie, giving but little indication of the deep chasms and caves that existed below the surface. Tom stood by the brink of a long, narrow valley; and up it was coming, slowly riding back from the Lava Beds, Dick Darling himself, returning with the led mail-pony. But not fifty feet from the negro crouched a group of five Modocs behind a rock, waiting for the unsuspecting mail-carrier. Well was it for Dick that that presentiment of danger had crossed Charlotte's mind, and induced her to dispatch Tom on his track. In a moment the darky justified his patroness' choice. Up went his Spencer rifle to his shoulder before a Modoc had risen; and the biggest warrior fell dead.

Then there was a confused hurly-burly of shots, ending by fearless Dick coming galloping up, a revolver in each hand; and the result was summed up in the death of three Modocs, the wounding of Tom in several places, none of them deep, and the flight of the remaining pair of assassins among the cracks and fissures toward the Lava Beds, while the negro and Darling galloped safely back to camp.

Before they went, Tom religiously scalped each one of his fallen foes and then turning to

Darling, the blood streaming from his wounds, observed:

"Marse Dick, you isn't fit to take care of yourseff. You jess better done gone git married. Missy Charlotte she send me to take care of you, and by golly you needs it, for ef it hadn't been for me, you'se done gone to hebben dis day."

CHAPTER III.

"Now, Marse Dick," said Tom Nelson, as the mail-carrier and he sat at opposite sides of a little fire, in the Twelfth Infantry camp, a night or two after the murder of General Canby; "dis yer war ain't gwine to be got over so quick as dem folkses in Yreka tink. It's berry well fo' Ginerel Gillem to gib big order, 'sterminate ebbery cussed Modoc,' but 'tain't so easy to do the 'sterminating dem fellers, Marse Dick. Now why for should you and I be loafin' roun' here, when we mout be out wid Missy Charlotte at Fairfield's, whar we is allers welcome, you know, Marse Dick. De season is gwine, and de corn and taters is not in, and dough fit in's mighty pooty work fo' leetle time, it get mighty tiresome to dis nigger."

Dick Darling laughed.

"If you're tired, you can go home, Tom. For my part, I volunteered to carry the mails during this business, and I don't intend to give up, till Captain Jack and all his pals are ironed in pairs."

"But den, what Missy Charlotte do?" asked Tom, shrewdly. He knew the right road to influence Darling. The young mail-carrier's face changed.

"What of her?" he asked. "I must do my duty without regard to her, and perform my agreement with the Government."

"But Missy Charlotte she send word by me, she want see Marse Dick, berry partickler," said Tom, stoutly.

"Did she say that?" asked Dick, eagerly.

"Yes, Marse Dick," replied the darky, unblushingly; which was a tremendous lie on his part, and he knew it. But Tom was too anxious to get home, to hesitate at a falsehood, more or less, if it only secured his end.

The young mail-carrier mused a few minutes.

"Tom, I must certainly go see her," he said, in a low voice, "if I have to get leave."

"No need of dat, Marse Dick," said Tom, shrewdly. "No need let ebberybody in camp know your business. You an' me is gwine to Yreky to-morrer. Let's go roun' by Fairfield's ranche, an' pay our respec."

"A good idea, Tom. We'll do it. Time to go to sleep. Good-night."

When the first faint streaks of dawn were brightening in the east, Dick Darling and Tom Nelson were in the saddle, and riding slowly and cautiously out of the Lava Beds. So broken was the country, and so favorable for ambushes, that the young mail-carrier was compelled to take a different route every day, to escape assassination.

In the faint, dubious light, they struck down a narrow canon, which led them out on the plain in safety, just as the light became plain.

Dick Darling breathed freer when he came out on the open prairie. Bold as he was, there was something in the nature of the Modoc war, so horrible and bloodthirsty, something so gloomy and repulsive in those black Lava Beds, that it weighed upon the youth's senses like a nightmare.

"Come along, Tom," he cried, when they were at last on the prairie; "if we expect to reach Yreka by way of Fairfield's ranche, we'll have to stir round pretty lively."

And the two comrades, white and black, stretched rapidly off to the westward, in the direction of Fairfield's ranche. Not a sign of a Modoc was to be seen, and in three hours from the time they left camp, the huge live-oak that sheltered the gate of the ranche appeared in sight.

The hound Hector accompanied them; for since that faithful creature had twice saved his

master's life, by giving intelligence of approaching danger, Darling had consented to Tom's taking him along. Now, suddenly, the dog gave a furious bay, and darted forward toward the ranche at such lightning speed that he left the riders far behind.

"Marse Dick, dar's an Injun sneakin' roun' de ranche," said Tom, eagerly. "I knows dat dog's ways. Let's ride like sixty."

And away went the comrades toward the ranche at full gallop, following the dog, who ran straight as an arrow toward the great live-oak tree that grew near the ranche gate, baying loudly all the time.

Then they heard a great disturbance in the ranche, and out came old Fairfield, rifle in hand, roused by the dog. They saw him raise his rifle to his shoulder; and then, like a flash, out darted an Indian on foot from under the great tree, and ran like a deer across the prairie toward a clump of cottonwood a little way off. But that Indian was not destined to escape. The old agent leveled his rifle with a cool deliberation, and they saw a little puff of white smoke. The savage threw up his arms and fell dead with a shriek, just as the two daughters of Fairfield came running out of the gate, each bearing a rifle, in the style of true border heroines.

As the comrades galloped up, there was a scream of joyful recognition, and then Dick Darling was off his horse, and Charlotte Fairfield was in his arms. Tom Nelson rode round the ranche in company with old Fairfield to ascertain if any more Indians were concealed near by, but none were found. The old rancher returned on foot to the gate, while Tom took a wider circuit through the prairie on the look-out for sign of any kind. The slain Indian proved to be a Klamath, as they supposed, and the fact made Tom very uneasy, as it showed that the Klamaths must be growing bold from the impunity of the Modocs.

When he came back toward the tree, he felt sober and thoughtful, but the sight he beheld there was enough to cheer up a hermit in Lent. Charlotte and Dick were standing under the great live-oak with their hands clasped in each other's, while the girl appeared to be earnestly warning Dick not to expose himself to peril for her sake. But Tom started with surprise as he looked to the rear of the lovers; for there stood Sophy Fairfield, regarding them both with a gloomy, lowering brow.

Her father stood near her, watching them with grave approbation, and not seeing the expression of his youngest daughter's face. But Tom did; and the shrewd darky understood the situation at a glance.

"Golly, dat light-haired gal as jealous of de dark one as she can be," he muttered. "Dey've both been pullin' caps for Marse Dick, and de dark one's got him. Golly, but I'se glad 'tain't my gal she's a-glowerin' at. She look as if she like to pisen her."

Here Dick called to him, laughingly:

"Tom, you've been lying to me, you rascal. You said that Miss Charlotte wanted to see me—"

"An' I guess as how she did, boss," was the grinning reply; "leastwise it look uncommon like it jess now. I nebber tells no lie, Marse Dick."

"But you told me she gave you a message, and she never did."

"Well, well, Dick, we might as well forgive him," said Charlotte, smiling; "for he brought you to me when I least expected you, and brought Hector, too, the good old dog, who saved us all from being murdered perhaps, for that Indian must have been only a spy from a larger body."

"And I'se tinkin', Missy Charlotte," said Tom, gravely, "dat we'll have to be gittin' out of dis hyar ef dem fellers is roun', or we won't git safe to Yreky. Dey won't trouble dis hyar ranche no mo', but dey'll go fur de mail-carrier whenebber dey finds him."

"You say right, Tom," said Darling, with a sigh. "We must even part, but not, thank God, for long. 'Tis true, I run a great risk, but you must remember that the pay is pre-

portionate. Once let these Modocs be crushed, and I shall come here to you, with funds sufficient to stock our farm close to your father's and then we will all be happy."

It was not, however, for some hours after that the mail-carrier and his sable assistant took their departure. Old Fairfield insisted on feeding themselves and horses before they went, and then they rode away toward Yreka, Hector galloping slowly along at their horses' heels.

Charlotte stood at the gate, watching the retreating form of the mail-carrier, her arm entwined around the waist of Sophy. The latter had her head averted, and generous Charlotte, never seeming aware of the true state of the case, was pouring into her sister's ears Dick's praises. At last, as she was lamenting the hard fate that drove him away from them so often, Sophy turned and faced her with gleaming eyes, saying:

"You are not fit to have the love of a man like Dick Darling, when you let him go to danger as if you could not help it. If he loved me, do you suppose that I would let him go as you have? No; I would cling around his neck, so that he should leave all the world to stay with me. And all the world might go to ruin outside our home, so he would stay with me."

And the jealous girl burst into a flood of tears, and flung away into the house.

And so Charlotte Fairfield woke to the consciousness that her sister loved Dick Darling.

CHAPTER IV.

THE sun was high in the heavens over Fairfield's ranche, and the air hot, sultry and dry, when a young girl came to the gate of the stockade that surrounded the house, and tripped down to the spring on the other side of the great live-oak tree near the gate.

She was a tall, magnificently-formed girl, with long black hair that fell nearly to her waist; and she carried the pitcher balanced on her head with all the upright grace of an Arab maiden.

She had been gone but a moment, when a second girl came to the gate, equally beautiful in face and form, but the brightest of blondes, as her sister Charlotte was the darkest of brunettes.

Sophy Fairfield opened the gate softly, and looked forth. Hardly had she done so when she was startled by a rustling sound in the tree overhead; and looking up, gave a low scream of surprise and terror. The next moment, down out of the branches of the tree, where he had been hidden, dropped a tall Modoc warrior; and, not noticing Sophy at the gate, rushed to the other side of the tree, where Charlotte had gone to the spring.

It was the work of a second for quick-witted Sophy, used to frontier perils, to slam to and bar the gate, and to rush to the house for a weapon. She knew, none better, that it was useless for her to venture out and add one more to the victims of Indian barbarity. At such times selfishness is the only course for a woman, and not till Sophy was safe in the house did she feel that she might do something to save her sister from a terrible fate.

It was at the beginning of that sudden Modoc outbreak which startled and alarmed the whole country. As yet the settlers in the immediate vicinity of the scene of hostilities were slow to believe themselves in any danger. Sophy's father, old John Fairfield, had been Indian agent and trader so long that he had grown to think that no Indian would harm him. That very day he had ridden fearlessly away to Yreka, leaving his ranche unguarded, save by the two girls, as he had done hundreds of times before.

Sophy Fairfield knew that she had none but herself to depend upon, and she made her preparations with all the cool courage of a border girl. The house was secured against attack in a few minutes—it was a veritable frontier fortress, easily defended—then the brave girl took down her light rifle, girt herself with

a belt containing two revolvers and ammunition, and ascended to the roof of the house to survey the neighborhood.

The summit of the little dwelling was surmounted with a small structure of heavy logs, meant on purpose for sheltering an observer, and the girl found no difficulty in surveying the whole of the horizon.

She had not far to look for her sister. The whole neighborhood of the ranche was deserted; and the presence of two or three cows, grazing outside the stockade as quietly as if nothing had happened, was conclusive proof that the Indians must have departed, as cattle are always uneasy in their vicinity. But a glance out on the prairie revealed the sought-for object.

A single horse, with a double burden, was moving rapidly off to the north-west in the direction of the Lava Beds, and Sophy recognized the figure of the Modoc warrior, while the muffled-up bundle on the horse's croup could be none other than her captured sister.

A strange thrill went through the girl's heart, as she gazed. Her thoughts may be best guessed by the murmured words that fell from her lips.

"She is gone—by no fault of mine—they can not blame me—I did not do it—but I loved Dick first, and now it will not be wrong to love him—poor Charlotte will be killed, and he will be free to love me—I know he would if she had not come between us—they can not expect me to follow her alone—and Dick Darling will be mine."

It was a terrible temptation to the poor girl. Dick Darling, the Dashing Dick, darling of all the girls in the Far West, had won two hearts where he had thought to win but one; and had fallen as a brand of discord into the Fairfield family, making rivals of sisters, who, till then, had never held more than one common thought. Only the day before he had left them, to carry the mails from Yreka to the Lava Beds, and now Sophy's rival was vanishing before her eyes, and no blame could attach to her.

The girl watched the retreating figures with dry, blazing eyes for some time, and then turned hurriedly away, murmuring:

"No, no, I can not look longer—I shall go mad."

She ran down stairs to the little sitting-room, and threw herself on a chair, burying her face in her hands and sobbing. When she looked up, a sudden change came over her face, for the first thing that her eyes rested on was a staring portrait on the wall. It was but a daub, to cultivated eyes, but to hers, accustomed to it for years, it produced a shock, such as the best efforts of a Titian could not have compassed. It was the picture of two little girls, with arms entwined, playing with some flowers, herself and sister, as they were once.

It acted on the girl like a stroke of lightning. She jumped up and ran wildly out to the stables, screaming:

"Lotty! Lotty! Dear little sister, I'll die to save you—forgive me."

In a moment more, with trembling hands, she was taking down a saddle and hastily girthing it on her own fleet Indian pony. Ere the Modoc ravisher was out of sight from the ranche, Sophy was mounted and on his trail.

The Indian who had carried off Lotty Fairfield was a tall, muscular fellow, richly dressed, but unarmed, save for a bowie-knife. He found the girl at the spring; seized her with a grasp of iron, and enveloped her in a blanket, ere she could utter more than a single shriek of terror; then dashed her to the earth with a force that half-stunned her; and in a moment had bound a rope firmly round the blanket, securing it so strongly that escape became an utter impossibility. The daring ravisher then lifted her up like a log, threw her over his shoulder, and strode away to the cottonwood thicket. Here he found a fine horse fastened to a tree, which he led out, laid the helpless bundle over the croup of the animal, mounted

himself, and then fastened the girl to his waist with a long belt.

That done, he started off at a round trot, heading straight for the Lava Beds, and for some time rode on without uttering a word. About six miles from the ranche appeared a grove of live-oak, the central one of all being as gigantic as the one that sheltered the ranche gate. To this grove the Modoc directed his course, quietly dismounted there, and fastened his horse to a tree, then laid his captive on the ground, and spoke for the first time.

"Ha, Missy Lotty, you t'ink Shasta Jim big fool, but he no fool. Me Modoc brave, and me want pretty white squaw—by gosh, me have him now. Come, give Shasta a kiss, pooty Missy Charlotte."

As the scoundrel spoke, he drew the keen bowie-knife and cut a slit in the blanket, which he threw open, disclosing the face of poor Charlotte Fairfield, gazing apprehensively up at him.

"Aha, Missy Charlotte," said Shasta Jim, triumphantly, "you know Shasta. You know Hooker Tom, kill yesserday by ole man Fairfield. Now den, you be my squaw, I call him all right. If not, I cuts you into little bits just now. Ha, s'pose you like dat? Come, you be Shasta Jim's squaw; he gib you nice lodge, good hunter, plenty buff'lo, much heap eat; s'pose you say yes."

And the savage leered lovingly at his captive, who turned her eyes away, shuddering with loathing, but not daring to speak for fear of hastening her own destruction.

Shasta Jim was about to renew his efforts at entertainment, when he suddenly started and listened. The rapid tramp of a horse at full speed was coming over the prairie. Charlotte rolled herself over, so as to see who was coming, and recognized her own sister, with a rifle gleaming in her hand.

"Saved! It is Sophy!" she murmured, and fell back, as Shasta Jim sprung to his feet, looking uneasy. The Indian, as we have seen, was unarmed except for his knife. But Shasta was too old a warrior to run from a girl, at whatever disadvantage of arms. He waited silently by his captive, whom he held up with one arm as a shield from the expected shot, and kept his knife behind him, ready for action.

Sophy Fairfield galloped up to the savage, rifle in hand, and then wheeled away, as if disappointed. Like a tiger Shasta sprung after and caught her by the flowing skirt. She screamed and dropped her rifle, and Shasta let go the skirt to pounce on the weapon.

It proved to be only a ruse of Sophy's. Even as he stooped for the rifle the girl fired her pistol into his back, grazing him, and Shasta Jim, waiting for no second shot, dropped the stolen weapon and fled.

A moment later the sisters were in each other's arms, Sophy murmuring:

"Forgive me, Lotty darling, I'll never be jealous again. Be happy with Dick."

CHAPTER V.

THE sun was sloping down toward the westward, and casting long, black shadows from the gigantic live-oaks that surrounded Fairfield's ranche, when a tall, wiry young fellow, on a bay horse, followed by a tawny bloodhound with black muzzle, rode toward the stockade gate from the direction of Yreka. Any mountain man would have recognized this rider as the well-known Dick Darling, first Pony-Express Rider on the Overland Route, and now volunteer mail-carrier between Yreka and the Lava Beds, where lurked the Modocs.

As Darling neared the ranche a pleased smile lighted up his face, and he murmured to himself:

"They do not expect me; I shall give them a surprise; but nothing to what they will have soon. My innocent little girl, how they have blinded her to the truth! But now it will not be long ere we—Holloa! what's this?"

As he spoke he reined up near the gate, and looked in surprise at the turf around the little spring under the live-oak. It was all torn up

and trampled, as if by a struggle, a broken pitcher lay beside it, and the tracks of a horse at full speed led off into the prairie in the direction of the Lava Beds.

Dick Darling cast a hurried glance at the gate. It was wide open, and his dog ran in, and was questing about the yard. Not a human being was in sight around Fairfield's. Impatient and anxious, he rode in, calling out: "Fairfield! Lotty! Sophy! Where are you all?"

Nothing answered him but the echoes.

"By heavens!" he muttered, "there's Modoccraft in this, or I mistake. Some of Jack's band have been round here. How lucky I have Hector with me."

Then he rode hastily out of the deserted ranche, calling his dog; and soon stood by the scene of the late struggle. He spoke to the intelligent hound as if he was addressing a human being, saying:

"Hector, there's been trouble here. Someone has carried off your young mistress and her sister. Captain Fairfield's gone, and where I don't know. Find the fellow that carried off your mistress, boy. Seek him, Hector."

The great bloodhound looked up in his master's face with his head on one side, as if he understood every word. Then he turned round and hustled about over the trampled turf, snuffing and whining, till, at length, he threw up his head, and uttered a long, mournful howl of peculiar tone.

"Indians; I thought so," said Darling, nodding. "Seek them, boy."

Hector waved his tail slowly back and forth, and went off on the prairie at a long, swift lope, baying in low tones as he went, while Darling rode after him, rifle in hand.

Straight away from the setting sun he rode, bending to the north-east, the direction of the dreaded Lava Beds, wherein lay concealed Captain Jack and his band of savage Modocs. It was also the only road which was as yet unoccupied by troops, the only way of exit left to the savages out of the net of danger which surrounded them. None knew better than Darling that he was going every moment deeper into peril.

But, as he rode on, watching the dog, his thoughts were only absorbed by a single thought: "What had become of his friend Fairfield and his daughters?"

After half an hour's rapid riding, a clump of huge live-oaks looming up ahead, toward which the dog was making, announced that he was running his quarry to earth in all likelihood.

The young frontiersman cocked his rifle, increased his pace to a full gallop, and struck off on a circle so as to ride around the little grove. His experience told him that it most likely contained an enemy, and he did not wish to afford a skulking Modoc a chance of a cool shot.

The hound, separated from its master, kept on as straight as a die, dashed into the covert, baying loudly; and, a few moments after, out came three people at different points, all evidently roused by the dog.

Two of them were girls, mounted on a single horse. The third was an Indian warrior, coming out of the opposite side of the grove.

With a cry of joy Darling galloped toward the Indian, just as the two girls headed their single horse for Fairfield's ranche.

In another moment the faithful Hector bounded out of the wood and sprung savagely at the Indian on the other side. Darling threw his reins over his horse's neck, and fired a rapid shot out of his Spencer rifle at the Modoc. Like a flash, the other dropped over the side of his horse, swerved, and galloped away toward the very place whence the girls had emerged, still followed by the hound.

But the borderer noticed as he passed that the Indian had no gun, and recognized him as one of the bravest of the Modocs, Shasta Jim by name.

He could hardly understand the reason of the other for following the two girls, but he dashed after him, wasting no more useless shots, but striving to close.

Shasta Jim swept on at full speed to the very place whence the girls had come out, where he suddenly stooped down to the ground, and a moment later sprung in his saddle with a yell of triumph, waving in his right hand a rifle.

Too late Darling saw the trick. The rifle had been there, lying on the ground, whoever it belonged to, and Shasta Jim had picked it up. Now it was a fair fight.

The Modoc did not continue his flight far. He only galloped out into the prairie to a sufficient distance to secure what sailors call an "offing," then turned his horse, and began to near Darling.

Both the antagonists rode at a slow canter in a spiral, gradually contracting their diameter to approach each other on the left hand, each keeping his cocked rifle at a "ready," and watching his opportunity.

Had there been no disturbing element in the contest, Darling would have fared badly; for Shasta Jim was accounted the best shot of his whole tribe.

But one antagonist was there, destined to bring the Modoc to an untimely end. It was the dog Hector, who, with almost human sagacity, now aided his master to some purpose.

White and red were within fifty paces of each other, both horses cantering smoothly and steadily, when Shasta Jim leveled his rifle. Hector, who had been galloping along by the near side of the Indian's horse, no longer giving tongue, sprung forward as the savage raised his piece. The dog uttered a startling bay, and seized Shasta by the leg. The rifle exploded harmlessly, and the bullet flew up to the sky as the Modoc, with a savage yell, turned on the dog.

In the same instant Dick Darling struck in his spurs and galloped in, delivering a single shot, when the muzzle of his piece was within three feet of Shasta's body.

With one last yell, the Modoc warrior threw up his arms and fell from his horse, as Hector let go his leg to seize him by the throat.

The riderless steed galloped away in terror, and the next moment Dick was off his horse, calling back Hector, and standing by the body of his slain enemy. Shasta Jim was quite dead.

Then the young man looked up, and beheld the two girls halted at a little distance, as if uncertain whether to stay or fly.

"Come on, young ladies," cried the young man; "the danger is past. This rascal will never insult you more."

Then, as if reassured, the two girls approached, and all was explained. Then Dick Darling learned, for the first time, that his friend Fairfield had gone out hunting that very morning; that in his absence Charlotte, the eldest sister, going to the spring for water, had been seized and carried off by Shasta Jim; that the gentle, golden-haired Sophy had turned heroine, armed herself, and gone in search of her sister, just in time to save her from the Modoc's insults; that the sudden appearance of the hound had frightened them all, so that Sophy actually dropped her rifle as she sprung to her horse; that Shasta Jim had been unarmed save for a knife, and had fled from her fire-arms. It thus became plain how the Indian must have been taken prisoner in some other place, from which he had escaped, unarmed, and had watched his opportunity when Sophy dropped her rifle.

Shasta's runaway horse was soon caught, and the three friends slowly rode back to Fairfield's rancho, talking over the occurrences of the day, and blessing the Providence that brought to the rescue in the right moment, Dick Darling and brave old Hector.

CHAPTER VI

THE land was quiet once more, and no longer did the settlers start in their sleep at the coyote's howl, thinking it the distant war-whoop of some scalping-party. The Modocs had surrendered at last, and Captain Jack was in irons, handcuffed to the assassin of poor Canby.

At Fairfield's rancho every thing was peaceful once more, the orange and lemon plants—

tions within the ring-fence were as trim as ever; the cattle were released from the corral, and the stockade gate was left swinging open, as in the days of peace.

Out in the garden two girls were walking, both strikingly beautiful, both in opposite styles. Their features were very similar, so alike that one could not fail to pronounce them sisters, but the coloring was essentially unlike. In the raven-black hair and sparkling dark eyes of Charlotte Fairfield, the elder, in the proud, resolute spirit that breathed from her whole face, could be read the race of her Spanish-American mother. In the wealth of flowing, golden hair that flowed over her sister's shoulders, in the large, liquid-blue eyes, with their mournful and appealing glance, the Saxon traits of her father's English ancestors were equally evident.

The sisters were both dressed in a style such as we in the East are not in the habit of associating with the supposed wilds of California, but which is an every-day matter to the wealthy farmers of the Pacific coast, where the soil brings forth riches such as our paler clime can not approach.

Charlotte's robe was dark and rich, suiting well her brunette beauty, and heavy coils of dark hair. Sophy's bright locks flowed loosely over a misty, white robe, enriched by a lace shawl of cobweb fineness. The two sisters strayed along in the garden, conversing quietly in low tones, their arms entwined around each other.

"How glad you must be, Lotty," said the younger, softly, "to think that the fighting is over at last, and your Dick safe. It seems to me that I could never be sufficiently thankful if such were my luck."

Charlotte turned and looked at her sister with a faint smile, as if half-amused, half-touched at something in the words.

"How do you know I am so lucky, Sophy?" she said. "Dick Darling is coming here, it is true, to settle close to us, and he has earned a heavy reward from the government for his services; but how do you know that I am the one to take Dick's fancy, child? He is dark, you know, and dark men generally fancy fair women."

Sophy turned her great blue eyes somewhat reproachfully on her sister, as she said, with a voice that trembled slightly:

"Lotty, this is no theme for jesting, my sister. You know—my secret—it is not kind of you to be playing with it. I would not treat you so, dear."

And she drew away her arm from her sister, as if deeply wounded. Charlotte Fairfield smiled affectionately, even while a tear was in her eye. As Sophy turned away her head, the elder sister threw both arms around her, and pressed her closely, exclaiming:

"Pardon me, pardon me, darling. We must not quarrel to-day. Why, Sophy, all the omens seem to point to your happiness to-day. See, you are dressed in white, and I in black. That scarf of lace, what is it, dear, but a bridal veil already made; and see, dear, we have stopped full in front of this orange bush in full bloom. Certainly, Sophy, all the signs say that you will be wedded first, dear."

"I don't see how or with whom," said Sophy, with a sigh.

"I'll tell you," cried Charlotte, gayly. "We will try it by divination. Do you not remember old aunt Chloe's way, with the orange and willow? See, here are both at hand, to try it with. Stay you there, stock-still, or it will break the charm."

With that she ran hastily to the orange-bush, and plucked a little spray of blossom, then broke off the end of a little branch of willow that had sprouted from the edge of the fountain hard by.

Returning to her sister, still smiling in her half-mysterious manner, she passed her arm around the other's neck, and sung in low tones:

Orange and willow we twine, we twine,
We that the Fates do be, do be;
We that the threads of life combine,
We that are sisters three, all three.

Orange and willow, on land and on bellow,
Emblems of love are made, are made;
Orange-buds perfume the bride's downy pillow
Willow-wreath circles the loves that fade

Orange and willow we cast in the air,
There let them fall at our feet, our feet;
Willow for her that is lonely to wear,
Orange-bud's snow-bloom the bride to greet.

In singing the last few lines, she cast both sprays high in air, and as they fell, pointed smilingly to the earth.

The orange-blossoms had fallen at Sophy's feet, at the very feet of Sophy, who stood, half-smiling, half-superstitious, watching the progress of the simple divination.

With a gay laugh Charlotte picked up the sprays and set one in her own hair, the orange-buds on Sophy's golden crown of tresses, crying:

"There, said I not so! You will be the bride, Sophy, and I must wear the willow. Does it not become me well, child? Nay, but the white blossom is shamed by your white forehead, my sister, and my black face—"

"Hush, hush!" said Sophy, half-crying. "I can not bear it any longer, Charlotte. You are mocking poor me, when you know that Dick is coming, this very day perhaps—"

"To crave the hand of Sophy Fairfield," said a clear, manly voice, just behind them, as the tall form of the renowned scout and rider, Dick Darling, sprung from behind the thick orange-bush, where he had been concealed.

"To crave the hand of Sophy Fairfield, as he has already secured the kind consent of her sister, and her father's blessing," continued Dick, falling on one knee before the trembling girl, who, pale as death, seemed almost ready to faint. "Oh, Sophy, dearest, you can not have been blind all this time to my love for you. You must have seen that it was you that I loved, and you alone—"

But here Sophy suddenly flushed up, and snatched away from the young man the hand which he held, saying, half-chokingly:

"For shame, Mr. Darling; for shame, Lotty, to combine together to make a jest of me, who never harmed you. Love me! Why, sir, you know that all this time your attentions have been paid to my sister in a manner that none could misconstrue. It is to her that you should speak, not me."

Darling laughed, and so did Charlotte. He sprung up, and passed his arm around Sophy, in spite of her faint resistance, saying:

"Dearest Sophy, I have spoken enough with her. Indeed, she made me beg like a slave before she would give her consent to taking you away from home; and your father said that he would never give his consent till Charlotte had. She's been the cruellest creature you ever knew, Sophy. She wouldn't let me speak to you, or even look at you, till this Modoc trouble was over. She said that she would not have her sister's affections entangled with a man who might be out to pieces at any moment. And so there was I loving you, my little dove, more than my life, yet compelled to keep away from you, and pretend to make love to her, for fear that you should be tempted to set your heart on me, and I might get killed. And now, tell me, dearest Sophy, am I mistaken that you return my love? Indeed I love you, and none but you; and Charlotte will tell you that I— Why, where is she?"

They both looked round, Sophy blushing scarlet, Darling pretending to be greatly surprised; but Charlotte had slipped off, leaving the lovers alone together, to discuss their differences.

That she had done so wisely was apparent, half an hour later, when Dick and his promised bride strolled into the house, and found it decked and in order, Charlotte in white, as a bridesmaid, her father in his best, and a grave, bearded gentleman in the uniform of a United States chaplain, waiting for them. To blushing Sophy it seemed an indecent hurry, but it became evident that the plot had been preconcerted with the others, for wedded were Dick and Sophy that very day, and there is not a finer rancho in all Northern California now than that of Mr. and Mrs. Dick Darling.

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